

Wisps of Smoke

by Jaxrond

Category: HakuÅ•ki/è-„æ;æé-¼

Genre: Romance, Supernatural

Language: English

Characters: OC, Okita S., Saito H., Sanosuke H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-09-06 18:59:30

Updated: 2015-10-15 19:56:11

Packaged: 2016-04-26 20:27:15

Rating: T

Chapters: 21

Words: 64,983

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Jade dreams of a man with cold green eyes. Amber has waking visions of a man with hair the color of midnight. Emily has always loved a specific shade of gold because it reminded her of someone special. Someone whose name she does not know. Their kind landlady, Nemu, seems to know more about these strange men than she lets on, leaving the girls to wonder what, exactly, is happening.

1. Jade

****Hello, readers. I do hope that you will enjoy my first ever Hakuouki fic. Because I am attempting to be as mysterious as possible, I will not do my usual into that explains a bit about the plot. You'll just have to read and find out what happens. I will warn you that the first few chapters are short since they are introduction chapters. They're annoying to write, but necessary to get the ball rolling. I started this story yesterday, when the idea appeared out of nowhere and slapped me upside the head, and thought 'this is gonna be good! I have to post it!'. I hope you have as much fun reading it as I do writing it.****

* * *

><p>His green eyes sparked with a dangerous light as they met hers. His lips twisted into a cruel and sarcastic smirk. She knew what his next action would be. He would make a scathing remark that would tear into her very soul. He was as skilled with words as he was with a blade, and just as deadly. However, even as he stood before her, tall, proud, and lethal, she was not afraid. She spoke quickly, eager to cut off his poison words before they could leave his mouth.

"You are wrong," she said, "You misread my intentions. I have not come to pity you."

His brows furrowed slightly and the smirk lessened.

"Then why have you come?"

She took a deep breath, her heart fluttering within her chest.

"I came to tell you that I love you."

Jade sat bolt upright in bed, the blanket pooling around her legs as it fell from her torso. A sheen of sweat caused her long hair to stick to her pale face. Her arms, bared by her white tank top, were hard and rigid as her hands fisted in the sheets, supporting her weight. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath in the wake of the realistic dream. Her heart raced within her chest as she remembered those dangerous, beautiful green eyes that had stared at her, so cold and yet so full of emotion.

Gradually, her breathing calmed and her fists unclenched. She placed one hand on her forehead, feeling the cold sweat that remained on her skin. Taking a final, shaky breath, she reached for the book that perched on her bedside table. As she opened it with trembling hands, she relived the dream in her mind.

It had been as if she had no control over her body. It had been her who had confessed to the man, yet it had not been. She knew for a fact that the person she was in the dream was not named Jade Good. In fact, she did not know what her dream self's name was. Nor did she know the name of the man. He had been in every dream she had for the past six months. Ever since her twentieth birthday, she had dreamed of the man. There was never anyone else in the dreams, just her and the man. He was always dressed in traditional Japanese garb. A pair of swords hung at his right hip, a katana and a wakashi, both of which he could use masterfully. Over everything, he wore a blue and white haori. She knew that the coat signified something important about who he was, but she could never figure out what. In the dreams, she was only able to say the things that had been scripted for her by her dream self. She too was always dressed in a traditional kimono with an obi sash, and, somehow, she knew that the scripted words she was speaking were Japanese.

At first the dreams had been intermixed with other, regular dreams and had appeared infrequently. Lately, however, they had dominated her sleeping time, as if they were attempting to send some urgent message. There were five that seemed to be on a rotation. First was the one where her dream self met the man for the first time. The second dream was more frightening, as it was about the man saving her from a group of other men, who had made their intentions toward her quite clear. Third, Jade's dream self was at the market, shopping, when the man came up to her, smirking. He started bantering playfully with her, seeming to enjoy her company, a charming smile gracing his lips. The fourth dream always began with Jade's dream self standing in the middle of a street that was bathed in moonlight. Before her, was the man. His eyes were blood red and his hair was white like freshly fallen snow. He gazed at her coldly. She was obviously not supposed to have seen his demonic appearance. She had just experienced the fifth dream, in which she confessed her love to the man after he scathingly told her that she should save her pity for someone who needed it. Jade knew that he had some sort of illness that had worsened, and that he had assumed it was the reason she had come.

Jade quickly wrote the dream in the book, a diary, that was almost full of other dream descriptions. In the top, outer corner of each page was the date, beginning on the day of her birthday, March seventeenth.

No matter how many times she experienced the dreams, her reactions to the happenings in each one were the same. The emotions of her dream self overran any familiarity, and it was as if she were experiencing it for the first time again.

Sighing, Jade, put the book back on her bedside table. Fortunately, the dreams only came once a night, which meant she could still get at least a small amount of normal rest.

2. Emily

All was peaceful as day broke on Sunday. Warm, morning sunlight filtered into the room through the blinds at the windows. It illuminated a tidy room with beige carpeted floors. Birds sang cheerfully outside in the trees surrounding the house. The room itself contained a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, and a desk. The items on top of the desk were well organized around the centerpiece, which was an open laptop that displayed a screensaver of gold ribbons that twirled and wound around the black backdrop. Atop the tall dresser was a single, white alarm clock, which was plugged into the wall at an outlet that had been placed at approximately waist height.

In the bed in the center of the room lay a figure who was no more than a large lump in the blanket. Save for her feet, which were resting on top of the headboard, she was completely immersed in her gold comforter, laying with her head pointing toward the foot of the bed. She made no sound as she lay beneath the thick covering, her chest rising and falling steadily.

Across the room, on her dresser, the digital display of the clock changed to show the time as eight a.m. A high pitched, squawking voice emanated from the clock.

"Wheeee-whee-whee-wheeeeeee!"

Her legs, which had been limply resting with her feet on the headboard, suddenly stiffened. After another moment of the continuously repeating 'wheeee-whee-whee-wheeeeeee!', she began to flail about under the blanket, unable to free herself from its confines. Muffled curses indicated her dislike at having woken in such a position. After a full minute of struggling, she finally freed herself of the blanket and leapt to her feet, standing on the mattress, a pillow clutched in her hand. Her eyes were wild as she searched for the source of the annoying voice. Upon locating her alarm clock, she scowled.

With a battle cry, she launched the pillow at the alarm clock with the precision of someone who is quite used to hurling pillows at unsuspecting objects or people when angered. The pillow struck the clock with a thump, knocking it off the tall dresser.

"Wheeee-whee-wh-" the sound was effectively cut off as the clock's

cord was torn from the wall by the momentum of the fall.

Emily glared at the clock that now lay on the ground, her eye twitching. Muttering to herself, she climbed down from her perch on the bed and shuffled to the door, obviously in a very sour mood at having been woken up so early. She threw open her door and stuck her head out.

The house in which she was staying was large. It stood at three stories, including an attic, which had been renovated into an apartment for the landlady. Emily and two other girls were renting rooms in the house for an almost suspiciously small rate. They were expected to buy their own food, but sometimes, the landlady completely ignored this rule and bought food for them herself. She did, however, let them pay their parts of the utilities bill and a small housing fee.

All three girls were roomed on the second floor. The floor itself was divided into two bathrooms and four bedrooms, all of which had doors that faced toward the center of the house. In the middle of the second floor, was a large open space that was mostly taken up by a railed off rectangular hole, which allowed those on the second floor to communicate with those on the first floor without having to go down the stairs. The stairs themselves sat at the east side of the hole and led down to the first level. Another set of stairs was connected to the west wall, leading up to the attic. The area from the railing of the hole to the wall was about three feet on each side, allowing one to walk along comfortably in order to reach the bedrooms. The hole itself was nearly six feet in width and ten in length.

Emily's blue eyes combed the upper floor of the house suspiciously, checking for signs of either Amber or the landlady, both of whom were prime suspects for setting her alarm to such an annoying sound. Directly across the open space from her room was Jade's room. Emily knew Jade was not of the personality to set up the alarm clock and therefore shifted her attention to Amber's room, which sat on the east wall, directly behind the stairs. Her eyes narrowed.

Amber was calm and usually quiet, which meant few expected her to do such childish things as set Emily's alarm clock to an annoying sound. However, those who knew her well, knew that it was exactly the kind of thing she would do. In all likelihood, she was repaying Emily for some prank that had been pulled so long ago that it had been all but forgotten. That was Amber's style. She would wait until her victim was lulled into thinking that she had forgotten the offense, and was thereby caught in a false sense of security, which, in Emily's case, took all of two weeks. Then, she would procure her vengeance. It was never anything destructive or dangerous. It was always things that were, while annoying, truly harmless. There would be no proof that she had been the cause of the incident, and there would never be any way to get back at her.

The landlady was suspect because she would sometimes do things to the girls just for the fun of it. She would find it hilarious that Emily had been woken by the voice of the annoying pig from the Geico commercial, especially since Emily had announced that she hated the little creature as soon as she laid eyes on it.

The root of the problem, though, was that there were four young women

of similar age sharing a house. Due to the camaraderie between them, childish pranks were a normal occurrence. Jade had just turned twenty six months earlier. Amber was the youngest, having had her nineteenth birthday not long ago. Emily herself would be turning twenty three in October. The landlady was the eldest at twenty six. She was a pretty woman of Japanese heritage. She bore the name Nemu Miakage, and was always fun to have around. The story she had told the girls was that she had inherited the house from a family member and decided to rent it out to those in need of a place to live. Emily, Jade, and Amber had happened to be her first three customers. There were no others. The girls suspected that Nemu had decided that three was enough and was not even considering the other applications, simply due to the handful they turned out to be. Despite a large downstairs that held two more bedrooms as well as a kitchen, living room, dining room, and entertainment room, and a basement that was divided into yet another pair of bedrooms, the girls had remained quite alone for over a year.

Emily shook her head. No, Nemu was not the one who had pulled the alarm clock trick. She never got up before eight thirty on Sunday. Seeing as the clock had not been set the night before, it had to have been set while Emily was sleeping. It was a well known fact that Amber was an avid reader who stayed up late into the night reading classic literature. It would have been the perfect time for her to do the deed.

Scowling at Amber's closed door, and knowing that, at the present moment, she had no means of retaliation, she tromped downstairs to make herself some breakfast.

3. Amber

Amber sat on the edge of her bed, looking out the open window. She stared at the maple tree outside without really seeing it. Instead, she saw a sakura tree, its pink blossoms swaying in the wind. It was indeed a beautiful sight. Her grey eyes were wide and unblinking as she watched one of the petals float through the large gap between the sill and the pane, spinning gracefully on some unfelt breeze. It blew past her face, brushing her cheek and leaving a trail of warmth behind. Instead of the gentle tickle she had expected, she felt what seemed to be the caress of a calloused fingertip over the smooth skin of her cheek.

"Their beauty does not compare," a deep, masculine voice whispered in her ear.

Amber's eyes went impossibly wider. She quickly turned her head to catch a glimpse of the speaker. However, there was no one there. She saw only white carpet and pale brown walls. She stared at the empty space for a moment before whipping back around.

The sakura tree had vanished. In its stead sat the maple, its leaves just beginning to turn to their fall colors.

Amber blinked quickly, attempting to make sense of what she had just experienced. Her gaze drifted to the floor.

This was not the first time something of this sort had happened. For two months, she had been having these...apparitions. Sometimes they

would appear when she was out in town. Once she was walking down the street and, suddenly, she saw the broad, strong back of a man wearing a blue and white haori as he stood on the sidewalk before her. She blinked in surprise. When she opened her eyes again, he was gone. Another time, more recently, she had been getting dressed. When she looked in the mirror to check that her clothes matched each other, it had not been her reflection that stared back at her. Instead, she had seen the image of a tall, handsome man in her mirror. Her breath caught as she stared at him. His hair was so dark that it appeared to be purple, hanging over his right shoulder in a tail. His eyes were sapphire blue, dark and serious. His skin was pale, but not unhealthily so. He wore black traditional Japanese clothes. A white scarf was wound loosely around his neck. At his right hip hung a pair of swords. Amber's eyes were wide with shock as she raised one trembling hand. The man in the mirror did the same, though his movements were much more graceful and his hand did not tremble. While her eyes darted nervously from his face to his hand, his remained focused on her face, as if he were memorizing every detail. Amber's fingertips touched the mirror, and she felt the alarming sensation of skin instead of glass. Slowly, she pressed her hand flat against what should have been a glass surface, but was instead the calloused hand of the man in the mirror. His hand was slightly bigger, his fingers longer. Amber stared into his eyes, frozen in shock. His pale lips quirked upward ever so slightly. Then, he vanished, and her own reflection was there, her hand pressed against cold glass.

Amber shook her head to clear it, more than aware of the blush that colored her cheeks at the memory of his hand pressed against hers. There was no cause for such embarrassment. Surely it had been her overactive imagination feeding from the books she was reading. Though, she did question how even an overactive mind could conjure up such a handsome man...and the feeling of that calloused hand, no doubt worn from years of using the swords that rested at his side. Not to mention the voice that she had heard just a few moments earlier. That voice that had made her feel so warm and safe, despite the shivers it sent down her spine. Though she was sure she had never heard that voice before, it was familiar to her.

A loud cry from another part of the house broke her reverie. She turned her head toward the door, hearing a muffled thump and then a clatter. Obviously Emily had received her present. Amber's lips turned up in a small smile. Emily would no doubt have forgotten the prank she had pulled on Amber three weeks earlier, after Amber had confessed her 'visions' to her housemates. The older woman had cut out a picture of Tom Cruise, from his role in the movie Interview With a Vampire, and taped it to the mirror. When Amber had walked in to find a life sized cutout, blood dripping from his mouth, his eyes seeming to follow her, she had screamed. Emily, of course, had laughed hysterically.

"I know he's not as hot as the other guy you saw! But that was funny. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm not making fun of your visions. It's just that when you were talking about the man in the mirror, I got this idea."

Amber had known that Emily meant no harm in the prank, but, nonetheless, she had retaliated. Personally, she thought the alarm clock idea was rather funny.

The sound of Emily's door opening and then slamming shut was followed

by a loud set of feet on the stairs, which meant the older woman had gone downstairs for breakfast. Amber listened for a moment longer before turning back to the window.

She and Jade were planning on having a meeting later to discuss her visions and Jade's dreams. Neither of them had ever believed in magic or the supernatural, but it seemed like they had been drawn into it either way. Jade dreamed of a different man than Amber saw, but both men wore similar clothing, and their blue and white haori were the same. The girls had decided to do some research and had found that their mystery men were most likely from nineteenth century Japan. The haori were specifically tied to the shinsengumi, a group of warriors who had acted as a police force in the city of Kyoto.

"So, what do two modern day American girls have to do with a couple of samurai from over a century ago?" Jade had asked softly.

"I don't know," Amber replied, "Should we ask Nemu? She's studied a lot about this time period. She said that her ancestral namesake lived around those dates."

"I think that we should let Emily in on the secret too. If she feels like something's being kept from her, she'll get angry."

Amber nodded in agreement.

The girls had revealed their secret at dinner that night. Emily had thought that they were joking at first, but when she saw their serious expressions, she had leaned across the table.

"Are you _serious_?"

Nemu had gone pale and remained strangely quiet throughout the meal. The next day, she had left the house, saying that she had urgent business to attend to. When she had returned the day after, she had cheerfully acted as if nothing had ever happened.

Amber frowned. In fact, she had been a little too cheerful lately, like she was trying to force herself to be normal. Nemu knew something, she was sure, and for whatever reason, she felt that the girls did not need to be privy to whatever information she held. Nemu had been nothing but kind to them, especially to Amber, and the youngest girl felt that it was improper to doubt their landlady and friend.

"I just hope that this isn't going to get us into trouble, Nemu, because you kept secrets," she murmured.

4. The Call

Here we go, the plot is taking off. Digital brownies to anyone who can guess who the caller is, and cookies to whoever can guess the name of the man in the background. Please, R&R.

* * *

><p>Jade wandered downstairs at around nine a.m. her brown hair a mess. It had tangled together, framing her face in a matted mess. She straggled into the white-tiled kitchen, where Emily stood at the

stove, frying eggs. Emily could be a good cook, it's just that she didn't have the patience to actually cook a meal. Nemu was the best cook. She made exotic dishes from numerous continents and seemed to know exactly how the girls would respond to each one. Jade decided that this was most likely because the woman had been a part of their lives since they were in high school, acting as an older friend and councilor while all three girls were coping with adoptive families. None of them had known who their parents were, or where they were originally from. It was as if they had simply appeared out of nowhere at a young age. All of them had been taken in by good families who had made sure that they had good lives. Emily and Jade were both still in contact with their adoptive parents. Amber's had died in an unfortunate accident just before her eighteenth birthday, which left her without a legal guardian. Fortunately, Nemu had stepped in as the new mother, taking her into the house with the other two girls, who were already renting rooms. Nemu had been a friend of Jade's adoptive mother, and felt that it was her responsibility to care for the girl until she came of age.<p>

The older woman had always taken care of all three of them. Jade had met her at the movies during her sophomore year. She was there by herself, as was Nemu. The older woman had approached her and asked if they could sit together since they were the only two in the theater. Two hours later, they had already made plans to go see the sequel together, having kept a running commentary during the entire show. Jade's foster parents had approved of her friendship with the older woman, believing that someone as mature as Nemu would be able to help her by giving her advice as she moved through stages of life that Nemu herself had completed not long before. Since Jade's adoptive parents were getting on in years, they felt that they could not keep up with a teenage daughter, and had welcomed the help that Nemu offered. She quickly became a family friend, and was like an aunt to Jade.

Emily had met Nemu when the woman was working as a librarian at her school. Emily had never been very academic and was struggling through a research project. Nemu had taken pity on her and helped with finding materials and resources. Emily had been very grateful to the older woman and often came down to the library for assistance with homework.

Each of the girls had a different relationship with the landlady. She was not just their landlady. She was a teacher, a helper, a friend, a _senpai_. She had offered each of them a place in the house, at first not wanting to take their money, but in the end, the three of them talked her down, convincing her to accept a ridiculously small rate in addition to utilities.

Jade wandered to the fridge and pulled out the jug of orange juice.

"If you drink from the jug again, I'll hit you with this pan," Emily told her.

Jade smiled slightly.

"That was only once."

"Yeah and it was nasty. You left your amebas in it."

The younger woman chuckled and poured some juice into a glass.

"Do you even know what amebas are?"

"Nope."

A set of feet on the stairs alerted them that Amber was up. Nemu would not be down until she had thoroughly showered and gotten ready.

"So, did you have any rendezvous with your dream man?" Emily asked, fluttering her eyelashes at Jade.

"Yes. The fifth dream," she replied, putting the orange juice back on the top shelf of the fridge.

"The one where you confess your love to him?" Amber asked, picking up on the conversation as she stepped through the doorway.

"Yeah."

Emily flipped two eggs out of the pan and onto a plate before replacing them with two more.

"What about you, Amber? Any more visitors in the mirror?"

Amber shook her head.

"No, today I saw a sakura tree outside my window. Then I heard a man's voice."

"What did he say?" Jade asked, turning to face her, the cup of juice in hand.

Amber's cheeks turned red.

"I can't tell you," she murmured.

Emily grinned, obviously unrelenting because of the alarm clock.

"What? Did he ask what color underwear you had on?"

Amber shot her a look.

"No. He told me that I was more beautiful than the sakura blossoms."

"Oooh, so he's hot and romantic."

Amber pointedly ignored her and pulled a glass out of the cabinet. She filled the glass with milk.

"Well, I'm just glad that I didn't get stuck with dreams or visions," Emily quickly changed the subject.

No matter what Amber had done, it was not fair of Emily to mock her about her visions.

"No," Jade snorted into her juice, "You just have an unhealthy obsession with the color dark gold."

Emily gave her a look before finishing the last pair of eggs. She had placed two over hard eggs on each of four plates. Knowing the drill, the other two picked up their plates before moving into the dining room. The table in the dining room was much too big. It could have easily seated twelve people, and Jade always felt like they were expecting other guests to arrive when they ate there.

Jade sat to the right of the head of the table and Emily to the left. Amber took her place on Jade's other side. This arrangement had never been verbally decided. It had simply come into being.

Emily took a stab at her eggs, her light hair sticking up every which way. A result of her strange sleeping habits. She glanced up at the ceiling as she placed her fork in her mouth.

"Hmm..." she chewed slowly.

Amber picked up on her thinking.

"Nemu is taking longer than usual."

Jade nodded, in the process of meticulously cutting up her own food.

"...Nemu has been acting strange lately."

Amber made a small noise of affirmation, her mouth too full to reply properly.

"She's always on the phone," Emily muttered, her fork hanging limply in her hands so that the prongs rested on her plate, "And she never lets us answer that one number."

Jade frowned.

"That's right. She even told us specifically not to answer it..."

Amber was silent for a moment before adding her own statement to the conversation.

"Nemu knows something about what's happening to us. Every time I talk about a vision or Jade talks about a dream, she suddenly changes the subject. I think she's hiding something."

"That's not like her," Emily's eyes were distant as she absentmindedly tapped her fork against the edge of her plate, "We've always been kind of a family unit. She's never kept secrets from us before, and this is a big deal, you know?"

"Yeah," Jade frowned.

The phone in the kitchen rang, interrupting any further conversation. Jade rose quickly and ran into the kitchen. She pulled the wireless phone from the receiver, not bothering to look at the caller ID as she pushed the 'talk' button.

"Hello?"

The voice that answered from the other end was friendly and masculine.

"Hello! How are you today?"

Jade was surprised. She did not recognize the voice.

"I'm fine," she said slowly, "And you?"

"Me? I'm doing well, thank you for asking!"

Another man began speaking in the background. Jade could not make out what he was saying, but he sounded like he wanted the man on the phone to stop with the pleasantries.

"Yes, yes, I'm getting there," the man on the phone said before once again speaking to Jade, "I'm looking for Ms. Miakage. Is she there?"

"We haven't seen her yet this morning. I don't know if she's up yet."

The man laughed heartily.

"Oh, so she's sleeping in. I wish I could do the same."

Jade felt her lips quirking. The man's good humor was contagious.

"Maybe you'll get to nap later in the day to make up for it," she suggested.

He laughed again.

"That's a good idea."

The man in the background spoke again, louder this time.

"Sorry, I'll get back on track!" he said to him before returning to Jade, "Could I leave a message with you, Miss...?" he trailed off inquiringly.

"Jade."

"Alright, Miss Jade. Would that be alright?"

"Of course, I'll pass it along to her when I see her."

"Wonderful! Could you ask her if six o' clock tomorrow at the Paper Moon is alright?"

Jade cocked her head, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"I'll make sure to ask her as soon as she gets up. Should I write down a callback number or...?"

"Oh, no, it's fine! I think she already has it," the man in the background spoke again, "Well, I had better get going! It was nice

speaking to you, Miss Jade!"

He hung up, leaving Jade with only a dial tone.

"You too," she muttered to the headset.

Curious, she pushed a button, bringing up the caller ID of the most recent call. After a moment's pause, she set the phone back in the cradle and returned to the dining room.

Emily had finished with her eggs and was waiting for Jade's return. She cocked a brow at the younger girl.

"Who was it?"

Jade was silent for a moment.

"It was that number."

Emily's eyes widened.

"Seriously? What happened? Who was there?"

Amber looked at Jade with an expression much like Emily's, waiting for more information.

"It was a man. He was very nice. I got the impression that he was easy going. He asked me to deliver a message to Nemu."

"What message?" Amber asked.

"He asked me to see if six o' clock tomorrow at the Paper Moon was alright with her?"

Emily frowned.

"What the heck? Is this her secret boyfriend or something?"

Jade shook her head.

"No. He kept getting off track and chatting with me. There was another man in the background who reminded him to get back on task. I don't think it was a date. Though I wondered that too."

"This worries me. I mean, I don't want to doubt Nemu in any way, but I don't think its safe for her to be meeting up with strange men...especially since she's been acting so strange lately," Amber said softly.

"Shh, I hear her coming."

A set of feet on the stairs preceded a greeting.

"Morning, girls!"

They each called back their own greetings in reply.

Jade quickly scarfed down her remaining eggs. Emily and Amber exchanged a look.

"Sorry for taking so long. I've got some things to take care of today so I had to get ready."

The girls peeked into the kitchen to find that Nemu had indeed gotten ready. She was dressed in a blue button-up blouse and black dress pants. Her silky black hair was pulled up in a half back, drawing more attention to her pale face. As usual, she had just the right amount of makeup on. She glanced into the dining room, smiling with her black eyes.

"I heard the phone ring. Was it anyone important?"

There was a moment of silence in which the girls exchanged glances. Despite Nemu's light tone, it was a loaded question. Finally, Jade answered.

"A man."

"Ooh? Did one of you lucky girls finally land a date?" Nemu's tone seemed to be teasing, but there was an underlying current of worry.

Jade looked pointedly at the table as she continued. A feeling of guilt had welled up inside her. She was sure that the man was connected to whatever Nemu was hiding, and therefore to the strange events of present. However, she felt like she was betraying her friend's trust by prying. After all, she could have looked at the caller ID, but she chose not to, half hoping that it would be the forbidden number. For just a moment, she was tempted to lie. Instead, she told the truth.

"He was looking for you. He asked me to pass on a message."

All sounds from the kitchen ceased for just a moment. Then they resumed.

"Oh? What did he say?" Nemu asked in the same forced light tone she had teased them with.

"He asked if six o' clock tomorrow at the paper moon is alright."

Nemu walked into the dining room, holding a bowl of cereal. Her lips were curved in a smile, but the expression did not reach her eyes.

"Hm, I'll have to call him back on my cell phone as I'm doing my errands today."

Emily smiled, attempting to act normal.

"Did _you _finally score a date, Nemu?"

Nemu laughed and shook her head.

"Oh no, we're merely old acquaintances. We bumped into each other recently and were looking for a time to catch up."

"Mm-hm. You'll be bringing him over for dinner in no time."

Nemu smiled genuinely.

"Oh, Emily. What would I do without your sense of humor?"

Jade and Amber glanced at each other again. Whoever Nemu was meeting, they were quite sure it was not just an old acquaintance.

5. The Paper Moon

****Sooo, I feel like this chapter moved a little fast...but it got me to where I needed to be. Reviews are much appreciated! And I'm still having a hard time believing that I posted so many chapters with so little time between (trust me, I'm not always this fast). Hugs to whoever can guess who the man at the end of the chapter is! And whose 'arse' is in the way.****

****Enjoy!****

* * *

><p>"You're joking, right?"<p>

The words were out of Jade's mouth before she could stop herself. Never before had she been presented with such a ludicrous plan as this.

Emily shook her head, smiling proudly.

"Nope."

"You've been watching too many James Bond movies," Amber said, turning a page in her book without looking up.

"I have not! Look," Emily said pleadingly, "It'll be easy. Kelly works at the Paper Moon. We'll tell her that we're there to keep an eye on Nemu since she's meeting up with a strange guy. Kelly will get us a table where we can see but not be seen. And then we can intervene if anything comes up."

"Emily, it'll never work. Nemu knows us too well," Jade argued from her seat on the couch, "Besides, it's not our place to pry like this."

Emily was standing in the middle of the living room, pacing up and down the red carpet that sat on the hardwood floor. Amber was curled up in an armchair, a thick tome resting on her lap. The evening light shone through the curtains at the windows.

The color scheme of the room was maroon and dark brown, giving it a warm and homey feel. A stone fireplace was set into one wall. All the furniture in the room faced the hearth allowing the occupants to feel its warmth in the winter. It was the perfect place to relax on Labor Day Monday. Not that the girls were doing much relaxing. They were much too worried about things like the mysterious caller, Nemu's strange behavior, and the odd visions and dreams.

"Exactly! And she knows that we know this. So, she would assume that we would never be stupid enough to follow through with it!" Emily continued.

"You said it, not me," Jade muttered.

"Anyway! I've got a feeling that this guy she's meeting has something to do with Amber's visions and your dreams."

Amber finally looked up. Her grey eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"It's just a feeling, you know? But I really think he's got something to do with it."

Jade was silent for a moment, staring at the wall, frowning thoughtfully.

It was true that she wanted to go along with Emily's plan of following Nemu to the Paper Moon. She too had a gut feeling that something big would happen if they did. However, she did not want to betray Nemu's trust. She debated the options of going and staying home. If she stayed, they would be in the same boat they had been for quite some time, and Nemu might be hurt by meeting this mysterious man.

She nodded, coming to a decision.

"Let's go."

Amber looked at her in disbelief.

"Jade..."

"I know, it's crazy. But...I've got a feeling too. Maybe if we go, we'll find out more about what's been happening to us. And...I don't like Nemu meeting up with this guy. Especially after she's been acting so strange. I mean, he could be dangerous."

Amber glanced between the two of them. Emily looked excited while Jade's expression was one of determination. Finally, the youngest girl sighed.

"Fine. Nemu's getting ready right now. We'll have to wait until she leaves to start getting ourselves ready."

Emily grinned. Jade nodded.

A few minutes later, Nemu came downstairs. The girls could not see her due to their positions in the living room, but they knew that she must look stunning. Nemu always did when she put time into her appearance. The jingling of keys heralded her departure.

"Bye, girls, I'll see you later!" she called cheerfully as she exited the house, "Behave!"

"We will!" Emily yelled back.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind their landlady, Emily was on her feet. She raced up the stairs, laughing.

"This is gonna be fun!"

Amber stared after her for a moment, a deadpan expression on her face. Then she looked to Jade.

"Do you think she's actually interested in helping us or Nemu, or does she just want to spy on her because she thinks it's fun?"

Jade smiled, swinging her legs down from where they had been resting on the couch..

"I think it's a bit of both," she rose, "I'd better get ready too."

Amber watched as she left the room. Then she looked down at her book. Sighing, she marked her page and closed the book.

"This is a bad idea," she muttered, going up to her own room.

She tossed the book onto her bed as she entered the room before moving to her closet.

The Paper Moon was a casual restaurant, which, in Amber's mind, meant that a pair of jeans and a nice shirt would be fine. She was already wearing jeans, so all that was needed was the shirt. She shifted through hangers of numerous shirts, pants, and skirts. Finally, she chose a sky blue button up blouse that caused her grey eyes to take on more of a bluish cast. She did a twirl in front of the mirror, half hoping that the man would appear.

He did not.

With a small shrug, she quickly ran to the bathroom, hoping to make it before Emily did. Emily always took forever doing her makeup, despite the fact that she did not wear much at all. Amber personally thought it was because she could not figure out how to use the applicators.

Once in the bathroom, Amber dug through her drawer under the sink until she found her makeup. She quickly applied silver eye shadow. She then ringed her eyes in grey liner and dark mascara. She finished by applying lip gloss to her pale lips so that they shined slightly.

As she was finishing her lip gloss, Emily began pounding at the door.

"Come on, Amber! I want to get ready too!"

Amber sighed, putting her makeup away. She opened the door, giving Emily a look.

"Don't bang on the door when you've only just arrived. It's rude," she said as she walked past.

Emily scowled and marched into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Amber looked over her shoulder with a mildly surprised expression.

"Oh my."

* * *

><p>"Amber, you're never driving again," Emily groaned, climbing out of the back seat of the car.<p>

Amber got out as well, pulling the keys out of the ignition.

"He cut me off. It was his fault, not mine. Besides, we made it safely."

Jade sighed, pushing her passenger side door open and stepping onto the black asphalt. She tugged on her flowing white skirt so that it did not touch the ground as she stood slowly. Worn above the skirt was a green blouse. Though she would never admit it, the fabric of the shirt was the same green as the eyes of the man in her dreams. The sleeves of the blouse were fitted to upper arms before they flared out at the elbow, hanging loosely around her forearms. Her long brown hair hung loosely down her back, framing her dark eyes.

Emily adjusted the waistband of her black skirt, which flowed about her knees in what could only be described as a 'flirty' manner. Her own shirt was white and short sleeved. It contorted to her body, outlining her bosom to its fullest. Her light brown hair was pulled into a messy halfback, her bangs swept off to the side. Her eyelids were dusted in gold and her lips given a similar tint. Numerous gold bangles clinked together on her slender wrists, accented by her gold nails. Her blue eyes sparkled excitedly, framed by dark lashes.

"C'mon! I called Kelly on my cell and got reservations near Nemu."

Amber locked the car before sliding the keys into her purse.

"I'm still not sure we'll be able to pull this off."

"You aren't the only one," Jade replied, pulling her own purse over her shoulder.

The trio made their way to the front door of the restaurant. As soon as they entered, a warm blast of air struck them, giving a nice contrast to the crisp fall atmosphere outside. Japanese music played over the speakers as they stepped up to the front desk. The woman working there looked up their reservation before having Kelly direct them to their table.

The Paper Moon was a traditional Japanese restaurant. The décor consisted of an abundance of rice paper screens, paper lanterns, and lovely flower displays. The restaurant was sectioned off by the paper screens so that different parts of the restaurant could have different themes in décor.

All three women were regular customers, as they all shared a fondness of Japanese food, which is how they formed a friendship with the waitress, Kelly. Kelly led them to a four person table that abutted one of the dividing screens. She pulled out a small pad of paper after they were seated, smiling brightly, her blonde hair tied up in a high bun.

"Hey girls! What can I get you to drink?" she asked cheerfully.

"Come on, you don't know, Kelly?" Emily teased.

Kelly grinned.

"Just making sure," she jotted down something on her pad of paper, "I'll come back with the tea in a few minutes," she glanced around before leaning closer, "Nemu's a few tables from the paper screen that I've put you guys next to. Careful though, there's a group of guys right on the other side of the screen. I think they're with her man. So keep the volume down, okay?"

The girls exchanged glances. If the man Nemu was meeting up with had brought friends, she might be in trouble.

"Thanks, Kelly."

The waitress nodded before walking off.

Jade thought quickly. They would need to discuss the goings on of the night without being overheard by the men on the other side of the screen, which would have been a difficult task. However, she, Emily, and Amber had all taken the same foreign language back in high school. They had chosen Japanese because it was Nemu's native language and they thought it would be fun to communicate with her in her own tongue. They had previously used it to discuss things in public that they did not want others to know. It would be perfect.

Jade stayed sitting in a normal position, not wanting to look conspicuous by leaning across the table.

***"It might be best if we spoke like this tonight," **she said in Japanese.

Emily blinked in surprise, having completely forgotten about their 'secret language'.

***"I agree," **Amber replied, ***"If those men are trouble, then we don't want to tip them off that we're here to keep an eye on Nemu."**

***"Hai, that could be a problem,"**Emily grinned, ***"What if they're ninjas or something?"**

Jade thought she heard a laugh turned quickly into a cough on the other side of the screen but decided to dismiss it.

Amber sighed.

***"This isn't the time for your stupid jokes, Emily."**

***"What? I thought it was funny."**

***"You always think your jokes are funny,"**Jade said wryly, ***"It's everyone else who disagrees."**

Emily stuck her lower lip out in a pout, averting her eyes toward the

screen. She blinked inquiringly. Then a slow grin stretched over her lips. She was closest to the screen and therefore had no one to lean over as she maneuvered to peek through the cracks between the panels. After a moment, she frowned.

***"Well, the guy whose arse is in the way is pretty big. But he's the only one I can see," **she muttered.

Jade once again thought she heard some snickering from the other side of the screen, but put it off to someone having told a joke at the other table.

***"Oh well, I guess we'll just ask Kelly how many there are," **Jade replied.

Amber looked at her in disbelief.

"Jade, what are three women going to do against a group of men? We came out here to make sure nothing bad happened to Nemu, and maybe get some information along the way. But none of us are trained in any way. What are we going to do if there *_is_**** trouble?"**

Emily grinned, leaning away from the screen.

***"Why, what everyone does of course. Call the police."**

Amber sighed.

***"You're both idiots."**

"Who's the bigger fool? The fool, or the fool who follows him?" Jade questioned in English.

"Star Wars?" Emily asked.

Jade nodded.

Amber shook her head and looked away.

Kelly chose that moment to come back with their tea. She spoke in soft tones as she poured the steaming liquid from the pot into three separate cups, her eyes darting toward the screen.

"So far they're just talking. Whatever it is must be pretty serious because they look sad. The guys at the table are just talking too. They've been drinking quite a bit of sake, though."

"How many are there?" Jade asked.

"Hmmm, about five. All of them look pretty fit. I really hope Nemu hasn't gotten into any trouble," the waitress looked worried as she placed the pot on a towel in the center of the table.

"We're hoping the same thing. Keep us posted."

Kelly nodded before hurrying off.

"Geez," Emily sighed, ***"I really don't like this, guys."**

Amber traced a pattern on the tabletop and remained silent. Jade

stared at the opposite wall in much the same state. She was the only one sitting on her side of the table, the side closest to the wall. The main isle that ran through the restaurant was easily in sight. Emily and Amber sat on the other side, facing her and the set of windows behind her.

"**Maybe one of us should peek around the corner and check it out,"
**she suggested.

There was sudden movement from the other side of the screen, like someone getting up out of their chair. It was followed by a series of murmurs and a few quiet laughs. Jade's eyes narrowed. Whoever these men were, they were making an effort to be quiet. She kept her gaze focused ahead, on the main isle, her instincts telling her that whoever had gotten up would be rounding the corner of the paper screen divider and coming into their side.

When he did, Jade felt like she had been punched in the stomach. Her eyes went wide and her heart stopped.

A tall, brown haired man stepped out from behind the screen, a smirk plastered to his face. He turned as he rounded the corner of the divider so that he was looking back at their table. He was wearing a pair of dress slacks and white button up with a red tie. His brown hair was cut so that it fell messily about his face. It wasn't his clothing or his hair that had stunned Jade, though.

It was his cold green eyes that seemed to stare into her soul.

6. Reality

Thank you to **_lylica_****for your excitement at new chapters being posted. It gives me incentive to write quickly. Thank you to ****_rawrrxixeatxyou_****, ****_OniKuShita_****, and ****_Hannah_**** for your encouragement. And thank you to ****_OuttaGalaxy_**** for your in depth reviews, and for catching my errors (it's much appreciated). Please enjoy the next chapter. It's kinda lengthy, but once I got started, it just kept coming, XD.**

R&R

* * *

><p>Jade sat stiffly in her chair, unable to tear her eyes away from those of the man. His smirk widened as he took in her rigid posture, the way her clenched fists were laid on top of the table. A bead of sweat made a trail down the side of her face from her hairline to her chin. She felt incredibly cold as she stared at him.<p>

His eyes were dark and held a flicker of amusement. His dangerous air was much more palpable in real life than it had ever been in her dreams. Looking at him now, she was as sure as her dream self had been. He would kill her if he was given reason to.

Amber noticed Jade's predicament and covered the older woman's hand with her own.

"Jade, what is it?"

Emily followed Jade's gaze and saw the man. Her eyes widened.

"Holy crap."

Amber turned as well. Her own body stiffened when she saw him. Then she turned quickly back to Jade.

"It's him, isn't it?"

Jade could not answer. She tried, but her mouth would not work to form the words.

The man chuckled, seeming highly amused by her reaction to him. He began to move toward their table, his movements fluid and graceful, his eyes never leaving Jade.

This was too much for her.

Abruptly, the room dimmed and the sounds around her became muted by the high pitched ringing in her ears. She felt suddenly weightless, weak, like she had lost control of her body. She saw the man's expression change from cruel amusement to surprise. He picked up his pace, moving toward them more quickly, urgently.

Emily reached across the table to her, her blue eyes wide.

"Jade!"

Amber felt helpless as she saw Jade's rigid posture loosen. Her eyes became unfocused and she began to fall to the side. Before either of the girls could do anything to help their friend, the green eyed man was there, catching her before she could hit the floor. She slipped into his arms, her eyes closed, her head falling limply against his shoulder.

The other patrons of the restaurant began to mutter. Several got to their feet in the natural hope of offering some sort of assistance but not knowing what to do. The green eyed man stood slowly, carefully, holding Jade close to his chest.

"Don't worry," he spoke to those around him in English, but his voice was accented, "She'll be alright."

Comforted by his authoritative tone, the other diners slowly went back to their meals, still glancing at Jade with open curiosity and worry.

The man's eyes moved to Emily and Amber. His lips slowly quirked back into a smirk.

"Now, how about we stop with the sneaking around, ne?"

The two women exchanged looks.

"You, the blonde," the man nodded to Emily, "Go get your friend and meet us outside."

Emily looked highly agitated at being called 'blonde', but her worry for Jade quelled any snarky comment she might have replied with. She

quickly wriggled between Amber's chair and that of the table behind her, hurrying to find Nemu. Like a child with a parent, an instinct deep within her told her that Nemu could fix anything. Nemu would help. Everything would be alright once Nemu was there. She practically ran between the tables and around the corner of the dividing screen.

Nemu sat at a back table near the middle of the wall with an unfamiliar man. A few tables to the left of them, abutting the screen, was a the group of men. Kelly had been right, they all looked formidable, even the youngest, who could not have been any older than Amber. They all watched her as she rushed toward the table where Nemu sat, seeming to know exactly who she was.

"Nemu!"

The older woman looked up in surprise, recognizing Emily's voice. Her brow furrowed as the younger woman reached the table, a panicked look on her face.

"Emily, what are you doing here?"

"There's no time! We need your help! Jade fainted!"

Nemu's eyes went wide and she stood quickly, glancing at her dinner partner.

"My apologies, Kondou-san, but I must attend to this."

"Of course," his expression was sympathetic as he stood as well, "Allow me to join you after paying for the meal."

Nemu gave a curt nod before grabbing Emily's hand and striding back the way Emily had come.

"What happened?" she asked, her tone full of urgency.

"There was a man, a man with green eyes. We think he was from the group in the back. He came around the corner and Jade saw him. Then, after a few moments, she just passed out!"

She could not see Nemu's expression from where she was being dragged along behind the woman, but she had known her long enough to know what it was. Her lips would be pressed tightly together and her eyes narrowed the way they were in desperate situations. Her grip on Emily's hand was tight as they hurried through the lobby.

The receptionist at the desk waved them through, guessing what their purpose was. Nemu dropped Emily's hand and pushed the door open, not bothering to hold it for Emily in her haste. Not that Emily minded, she was far too worried about her friend.

"Nemu," she asked in a low tone, "Is it him?"

Nemu actually stopped for a moment, her eyes dropping to the ground. She was silent for a long pause.

"Yes. The man in Jade's dreams and the man currently with her are one and the same."

"How?" Emily's eyes were wide with shock.

Nemu's eyes snapped up again, becoming focused once more.

"I'll explain everything later, for now, Jade takes precedence."

The two women made their way to Amber's car, where she was waving them over. She stood slightly off to the side. The green eyed man had placed Jade in the back seat and was crouched down slightly, his fingers pressing against the underside of her wrist. He did not look up when Nemu and Emily arrived.

"She'll live," he said, placing Jade's hand in her lap before standing.

The cold look he shot Nemu gave Emily and Amber the impression that he did not like her much at all.

"You really didn't tell them anything, did you, Oni woman?" his sneer was enough to send Amber back a few steps, "If you had, my appearance wouldn't have shocked her."

Nemu pushed past him to examine Jade herself.

"I didn't want to endanger them."

He shot her a glare, not moving more than a few inches to let her near the unconscious girl. It was obvious that he was about to make a scathing remark, but another voice interrupted.

"That's enough, Souji."

Souji immediately quieted, though his cold expression remained.

"Hai, Kondou-san."

The man Nemu had been sitting with walked over to stand with them. His face was worried as he looked into the car to see Jade.

"Is she alright?"

"Hai," Nemu answered in Japanese without thinking, "She was just shocked to see Okita-san."

Kondou nodded.

"I see. I don't mean to be rude, Miakage-san, but I think that this proves my point. You alone are not enough to protect these young women. You did not even know that they had followed you here, placing themselves out in the open."

"I didn't expect them to question me. Normally they respect me enough to trust my judgment."

Amber looked down upon hearing the thinly veiled anger in Nemu's words. Emily straightened.

"We're sorry for betraying your trust, but you were worrying us, Nemu. You've been acting strange ever since Jade and Amber came

forward. We thought you were hiding something, but now we know," her eyes narrowed, "I've never been angry with you before, but right now, I'm pretty damn close."

The sternness and anger drained from Nemu's face.

"I'm sorry girls...it shouldn't have happened like this."

The doors at the front of the restaurant opened again and the group of men came out. There were four of them without Okita in their numbers. Emily was not surprised to see them since she had caught a glance of them on her way to get Nemu. Amber, however, was a different story. She looked over her shoulder as they approached. Then she went very pale.

One of the men, a young man with hair so dark it was purple, stopped to stare back at her. His visible eye widened. The other was covered by his bangs. His hair was shorter than it had been in her vision of him in the mirror, but there no mistaking that it was him. He wore a black dress shirt and black dress pants. A dark blue tie was at his neck. His expression had never changed, but his eyes were filled with a strange sort of longing as he watched her face.

Amber slowly turned so that she was facing him. Hesitantly, she took a step forward. Then another. She was unaware of the expressionless mask Nemu had put on in response to this, Emily's bewildered look, or the grinning faces of the other men. It was if the world had become suddenly focused around him. With those slow, hesitant steps she made her way to stand before him, looking up at him. His sapphire eyes became guarded, as if he were worried about what she might say or do.

Slowly, deliberately, she stretched out a hand and gently laid it against his chest. Beneath his clothing and his flesh, she felt his heartbeat, only slightly quickened despite the emotions in his eyes. She stared at her hand for a moment before back to his face.

"You _are _real," she breathed.

He paused. Then he gave a single, slow nod.

In response, Amber's face broke into a smile, which caused his cheeks to darken slightly.

The biggest man of the group, who had refused to dress up, laughed boisterously. The man next to him, who had hair that was the reddish color of cherry wood, smiled. The youngest of the group snickered.

"Saito's blushing!" he cried.

"Hai, it's a rare sight so take a good look, Heisuke!" the big man hooted.

Saito ignored them as Amber withdrew her hand, her own cheeks going pink. His lips quirked slightly at this and his eyes softened.

Emily made a face.

"Put your eyes back in your head, Amber."

Amber looked down quickly, her blush more pronounced.

Despite being angry a few minutes earlier, Okita gave a laugh and shot off something in Japanese so quickly that neither Emily or Amber could understand. Whatever he said caused the men to begin laughing again. Saito closed his eyes against the comment with a small sigh. Kondou shook his head, attempting to look stern in reply to Okita's words.

Nemu cleared her throat.

"We aren't accomplishing anything by standing out here in the parking lot. We should return to the house. Follow my lead, please."

Kondou nodded.

"Hai. If you don't mind, I would like to send at least one of my men with each of your two vehicles."

Nemu's lips pressed into a thin line, but she nodded, knowing that it was unavoidable. She turned to Emily.

"You're with me, Emily. You can explain this foolish plan of yours on the way back."

Emily looked sheepish.

"How'd you know it was my plan?"

Nemu gave her a look.

"Because you're the only one that would be fool enough to do something like this."

Emily blinked.

"...Should I feel insulted?"

Nemu sighed and gave her a push toward her car. Kondou turned to the red haired man.

"Harada, please accompany them."

Harada bowed before following Nemu and Emily.

Amber pulled her keys out of her purse and walked around to the driver's side door, resisting the urge to steal glances at Saito.

Kondou nodded at the stoic man.

"Saito, go with her."

Saito bowed and moved to the passenger side door.

Okita spoke up, his ever present smirk returning.

"If it's alright with you, Kondou-san, I'll go with them as well."

Kondou looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. then he nodded.

"That's fine, Souji."

Okita gave a slight bow before sliding into the back seat, behind Amber, who was situating herself in the driver's seat. She glanced in the rearview mirror.

"Would you mind putting the seat belt around her, Okita-san?"

Okita's smirk grew more pronounced.

"Nani, do you not have confidence in your own driving?"

Amber gave him a deadpan look.

"It's illegal for passengers not to have seatbelts on," she said before starting the engine.

Saito buckled himself in. Okita sighed and reached across Jade's unconscious form, careful not to touch her in any manner that would upset Amber. After buckling her in, he attended to his own seatbelt. He then gave Amber a look.

"Are we leaving now?"

Amber put the car in reverse and carefully backed out. Saito's presence was making her nervous, so she had to take more care than usual. As they pulled out of the parking lot, she reviewed the emotions she had felt when she had seen him. First she had been shocked. Then she had been curious. More than that, however, she had felt a surge of something she refused to put a name to.

That's ridiculous. We just met.

A shiver ran down her spine as she thought about her visions of him.

Didn't we?

7. The Beginning of the Tale

****Hello, dear readers! I would like to thank all my reviewers, favoriters, and followers for their support. And for giving me incentive to continue writing quickly. I've recently been watching ****_Hakuouki Reimeiroku_**** and am absolutely loving it! I cry almost every time one of the main guys walks on screen because they're alive and still fighting and...and *sniffles*. ****

****I also have an announcement. TOMORROW, ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, I WILL BE 18. I'm finally going to be an adult! I'm so excited!****

****Please, R&R my story as a birthday present!****

* * *

><p>Emily sat in a tense silence in the passenger seat of Nemu's jeep, her arms folded over her chest and her face displaying a rare coldness. The headlights of cars passing them in the opposite lane illuminated her face, throwing it sharply into focus before once again hiding it in shadow. She had sat as far away from her friend as possible. Nemu glanced at her out of the corner of her eye and sighed.<p>

"Emily-" she began.

"Save it, Nemu," Emily growled, "I'm sure that you'll be giving a full explanation back at the house."

Nemu pressed on despite Emily's objection.

"Emily, I never wanted to hurt you in any way."

"It's not me I'm angry about. I'm the oldest you know, I'm supposed to take care of the other two. I wanted to help them so much...I've never felt so helpless before. And the next thing I know, you were keeping secrets that could have helped them," her voice grew in volume as she spoke, "Do you know how many nights I walked past Jade's door and heard her crying herself to sleep because she was afraid of the dreams and didn't know what they meant? How many times Amber stayed up late into the night because she was afraid that if she slept, she would have the same types of dreams? They went to you for help and you _wrote them off_!" Emily did not fight the angry tears that came to her eyes.

Nemu seemed to deflate more with each word.

"And all in the name of protecting us? Seriously? It'd probably work out better if we knew who exactly wants to hurt us. Instead you just let us go about our lives completely oblivious. I thought you cared about us, Nemu!"

A large hand suddenly clapped down on Emily's shoulder. She looked back in surprise, dark tracks on her cheeks showing where her makeup had been dragged down her skin by her tears. She had completely forgotten about the man in the back seat. He leaned forward, his face serious.

"I know you're upset, but this is difficult for her as well," his dark gold eyes bored into hers, "Please, be patient and wait for her explanation before you start making accusations."

"Thank you, Harada-san," Nemu murmured.

Emily stared at him. She nodded slowly.

"Okay," she said, her anger going out of her.

He smiled softly and she felt her heart skip a beat. She had just discovered that she was not without a historical tie, as she had thought. The color dark gold had always brought back impressions that were almost memories. She had associated it with happiness, warmth, a large hand wrapped around hers, a man's gentle smile. She had also associated it with strength, willpower, determination, and, strangest of all, a specific weapon. Now she knew why.

Her favorite color was the same shade as Harada's eyes.

* * *

><p>She watched him carefully, waiting for him to react to her words. She had laid out her heart to him, and she honestly was not sure if he would accept or reject her. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. Then he started toward her. She froze, unsure of his intentions.

As soon as she was within reach, he grabbed her sleeve tightly in one hand and pulled her into a warm embrace. She felt his cheek resting against the top of her hair. Her own was pressed to his shoulder so that her forehead was nestled in the crook of his neck.

"You love me, ne?" it was meant to be teasing, but lacked the tone, "I was afraid of that."

"Why?"

"I'm a walking dead man, Jun-chan," he murmured, dropping his arrogant air for once and letting her see a glimpse of what was deep within.

"Then let me love you until you leave this earth, Souji-kun," she whispered.

Jade opened her eyes slowly. She stared up at the off-white ceiling of her bedroom before blinking in confusion. She should have still been at the restaurant, not at home. She felt warmth all around her and realized that she had been carefully tucked into bed. Slowly, she sat up, the purple comforter falling to lay on her legs. She frowned at the thick blanket, growing even more confused when she realized that she was still wearing her skirt and blouse. The green blouse stirred something in her memory. A pair of eyes...

Her own eyes flew wide as she remembered.

She had seen him. The man with the beautiful, cruel green eyes. The last thing she remembered was the world blurring around her, his surprised expression, and then, darkness. It made no sense to her until she realized the embarrassing truth.

She had fainted.

She gave a small groan and put her face in her hands. Emily would never let her hear the end of it. Not only that but, if he was still around, she had a feeling the man would not either, based on what she had seen in her dreams.

It was at that moment that she realized something. The dream she had just experienced was different from the others. It was a continuation of the fifth dream. Not only that, but she had heard names spoken in the dream. For the first time, she had heard the name of the green eyed man.

"Souji..." she murmured.

A soft knock sounded on the door, interrupting Jade's memories of Souji.

"I'm coming in."

Amber entered, her face solemn, though she did look happy to see that Jade was awake.

"Oh, good, you're up. I was coming to see if I couldn't wake you. You slept through the night."

Jade pulled the blanket off and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, noticing that it was indeed morning outside.

"I'm fine," she said, standing.

Amber nodded. She looked strangely preoccupied. Her grey eyes were distant even as she interacted with Jade. The older woman cocked her head to the side.

"Was yours there too?" she asked.

Amber blinked, clearing her head, and looked up at her. Her brow furrowed as she registered the question.

"Mine?"

"The man from your visions."

"Oh," the girl's cheeks went pink, "Y-yes, he's here."

"Here?"

Amber nodded.

"After we came back from the restaurant last night, Nemu and Kondou-san decided to make temporary sleeping arrangements here," she smiled slightly, "Saito-san took the room up here."

Jade cocked a brow.

"Saito-_san_"

Amber looked down, blushing again.

"Nemu suggested we use the Japanese honorifics to make them more comfortable."

Jade felt her eyes narrow.

"How many are staying here?"

"There are six of them, including Kondou-san. He's the one you talked to on the phone. He and Okita-san are staying on the first floor. Heisuke-kun, Shinpachi-san, and Harada-san are downstairs."

Jade nodded slowly, moving toward the door. It made her uneasy that these six men were staying in the same house as them, even if Kondou had seemed rather friendly. It made her even more uneasy that Okita

was so close. While she was excited at the prospect of seeing him again, despite the way their last encounter had ended, she was very nervous. She had never expected this man to be real. Now that she knew he was, she was not sure how to react to him.

As she passed Amber to walk through the door, a thought occurred to her.

"Amber, who carried me upstairs last night?" she asked with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Amber could not help the grin that appeared on her face. Despite their current situation, she knew what Jade was afraid of, and could not resist the chance to tease her.

"Why, Okita-san, of course."

That was enough to set Jade's face aflame.

"He tried to put on a tough front and act aloof, but he wouldn't let anyone near you. One of the others offered to do it but he said 'if you touch her, I'll have to kill you'," Amber's grin faded, "You know...he talked like he knew you. The same thing happened with Saito-san. He just stared at me like...like there was something between us."

Jade was silent for a long moment, her blush dying down.

"Amber, what if my dreams and your visions...are memories?"

Amber frowned.

"From nearly two hundred years ago?"

"They're real, aren't they?" the other girl motioned toward the open door with her head.

"They are," she remembered the steady pulse of Saito's heart when she had placed a hand on his chest.

"This just makes me wonder 'what's going on' even more," Jade murmured, walking out the door.

Amber caught her arm.

"You might want to at least get dressed and comb your hair. They are still guests, no matter the situation."

Jade realized how sloppy she would appear if she went downstairs in her rumpled clothes and messy hair. She felt herself flush slightly in embarrassment.

"I'll be down in a few minutes."

Amber nodded and left, closing the door. She went downstairs to find everyone gathered at the huge dining table. She stopped in the doorway, unsure of where to sit.

Emily had placed herself between Shinpachi and Harada. After she had returned last night, her face streaked with tear tracks, she had

announced that she was not going to bed until she knew what was going on. The red haired man had pulled her aside, seeming to know exactly what to say in order to calm her down. He had rested one large hand on her head and smiled gently at her, speaking in a low, persuasive voice. Amber had been amazed to watch as the tension went out of Emily's shoulders. The older woman stared up at him, entranced by his eyes. Then she nodded, agreeing to go to bed and wait for everything to be explained in the morning, when Jade was awake. Harada had smiled at her and thanked her. Never before had anyone had that sort of calming effect on Emily. She was always hot headed and playful. As soon as he touched her, though, she was calm, willing to do what he suggested.

Amber's eyes slid to Okita. He sat between Kondou and Saito. He felt her gaze and glanced at her, his lips turned up in a catlike smile. His pupils seemed to be almost slitted within his green eyes, adding to his feline appearance. Amber decided that he reminded her of the Cheshire cat, always smiling but dangerous. She had been surprised when he had carried Jade upstairs the previous night. When Heisuke had offered to do it instead, Okita had looked up from unbuckling Jade and given the boy what appeared to be a teasing smile, his eyes closed.

"Ne, Heisuke-kun, you should know," his eyes opened, cold and dangerous, "If you touch her, I'll kill you."

Heisuke had immediately backed off, muttering about how he was just trying to help. Okita had easily lifted Jade from the car, a tender expression briefly flickering across his face. Amber directed him to the other girl's room, holding the door open for him and pulling aside Jade's covers. She had watched silently as he laid Jade down carefully, gently, his eyes never leaving her face. Then he had drawn the covers up around her, tucking her in. Okita brushed a strand of hair back from her face, smiling softly. Then his green eyes had flashed up to Amber, immediately hardening.

"If you tell anyone about this..."

Amber cocked a brow.

"You'll kill me?" she guessed.

He nodded before leaving.

"Amber-chan!" Heisuke's voice broke through her reverie.

She looked to where he was sitting at the foot of the rectangular table, across from Nemu. He smiled, patting the chair next to him.

"You can sit next to me!"

Amber felt herself smile slightly.

"Arigato, Heisuke-kun."

She sat next to him and examined the group. To her direct right was Heisuke. Next to him was Shinpachi. Followed by Emily, then Harada. Between Harada and Nemu, who was at the head of the table, sat an empty chair for Jade. Along the left side of the table was Kondou,

who was next to Nemu. Okita sat next to him, leaving an empty space between him and Amber.

Saito entered the room at that moment, having just gotten off the phone with someone named Hijikata. He nodded to Kondou, as if to verify something, and then sat between Amber and Okita. He looked at her for a long moment with his sapphire eyes, his gaze gentle as he observed her.

"Good morning," he said politely, as they had not seen each other yet.

"Good morning," Amber replied, "Did you sleep well?"

His lips quirked and he nodded.

"Yes. And you?"

Amber hesitated.

"Not really," she answered honestly.

His eyes were understanding.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Whatever further conversation they might have had was interrupted as Jade entered the room. She had combed her brown hair, allowing it to fall loosely about her face. Her skirt and blouse had been traded for jeans and a t-shirt that read 'Sarcasm is my Second Language'. The shirt had been a gift from Emily.

She glanced at the empty chair next to Nemu and then glanced around for another. Upon finding none, she slid gracefully into the seat, her face schooled into an emotionless mask. Okita's eyes followed her movements, his smile dropping slightly. Jade's eyes flickered to him. They held gazes for a moment, then they looked away from each other.

Kondou smiled, despite the tense air in the room.

"Well! Since we're all here, I guess we can begin," he looked at Nemu, "Miakage-san, if you would begin. I believe we all are very interested in your story."

Nemu appeared very nervous. She stared at the table, her hands clasped tightly. She slowly looked up and met the gaze of each of the girls for a moment. Amber's grey eyes were stoic and unblinking. Emily's were haughty, proud, and angry. Jade's were cool and emotionless. The oldest woman took a deep breath.

"I ask that you allow me to speak uninterrupted, as it will be easier that way," she began, "My story begins over one hundred and fifty years ago, when I was cast out of my clan for refusing to marry a man of noble status."

8. The Truth

****Here we go! The mystery unveiled! I put a lot of thought into how I**

was going to do this. I met up with a couple girls from my old writing guild for a birthday brunch and we discussed plot ideas (they're the ones who introduced me to Hakuouki). **

Thanks for all the birthday wishes and reviews, they mean a lot to me!

* * *

><p>"Worthless whore!"

Nemu cried out as her father's hand struck her face with a ringing slap, her head snapping to the side. She fell to her knees, hoping to duck under his reach.

"For years we have planned this engagement and now you cast it aside!" he struck her again, "Insult your suitor! Insult his honor!"

He raised his hand to strike once more but Nemu's brother rushed forward and caught his arm. Her father snarled at his son, his yellow gold eyes violently angry. Kaito regarded his father quite calmly.

"Even if she has refused the wishes of the clan, father, she is still a pureblooded female."

Nemu's father looked at Kaito for a long moment before lowering his arm.

"Unfortunately," he glared at his daughter, causing her to cringe back in fear.

She could feel bruises blooming across her face. A dull pain in her stomach marked where her father had first kicked her after she refused her repulsive husband to be. The male Oni her father had betrothed her to was nearly eighty. Despite the natural good looks that all Oni possess, he was as repellant as a gutted toad. Though he had appeared to be no older than thirty, the male Oni had the air of a lecherous old man. He had leered at her, his eyes meeting her chest rather than her gaze. Though her purpose in the marriage would have been to breed Oni children, it was obvious that this man simply wanted the honor, and pleasure, that came with marrying one of the few Oni females that inhabited the world at that time.

When he had reached out to touch her face, Nemu had slapped him.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed.

"Nemu! Know your place!" her father growled.

The man had tried once again to touch her cheek. This time, Nemu sank her teeth into his hand. She knew that it would heal quickly, since that was one of the gifts the Oni populace possessed, but it would still be very painful.

The man cried out and recoiled. He stared at her in disbelief. Then he stormed out. It had been then that Nemu's father attacked her.

"She won't be of any use with this rebellious nature of hers, father."

Nemu was jerked back to the presence by her brother's voice. She looked up at him through the thin curtain of black hair that had fallen over her face.

Kaito, who, like his father, was in his true form, regarded his sister the way one may regard an interesting insect that was found crawling near their shoe. Nemu glared back defiantly, despite the beating it could earn her. She may be beaten, but she would never be killed. The more powerful remaining Oni clans would descend on her family in a tide of death if word of the means of her demise ever reached their ears. The killing of a precious female would not be tolerated.

"Then what do you suggest we do with the ungrateful wench? We can't kill her," her father turned his back on her, speaking as if she were not there.

Kaito continued to observe her, meeting her glare in an unperturbed manner.

"I would say marry her off to the head of the Kazama clan, but rumor has it that he is chasing after the missing daughter of the Yukimura. He won't be interested."

"A shame. He would teach this one some manners."

Nemu pressed her lips together. It was true that Chikage Kazama was said to have an iron hand, but she was lucky that he had set his sites on the Yukimura. This was partially because her father had made sure to spread the word of her engagement when she was still young, so as to ward off any who might attempt to take advantage of her. The eligible males had left her alone, looking for brides elsewhere.

"Indeed," Kaito continued, lazily moving his eyes from Nemu to his father, "I think...that she should be exiled."

Her father was silent for a moment. Then he turned, looking at his son curiously.

"Exiled?"

"Yes, let her live among those human mongrels. Perhaps losing the protection of our family name would cause her to realize her mistake," her brother's eyes flashed gleefully, though his expression did not change.

Her father thought about this for a moment. Then he smiled a terrible smile.

"Yes," he walked over and rested a hand on his son's shoulder, "When the time comes for you to replace me as head of the Miakage clan, you will be a strong and wise leader, my son."

_Nemu glared at both of them as they called for the guards that would be charged with escorting her to her new life as an exile. She was

not permitted to bid goodbye to her mother or any of the servants who had cared for her since she was a child. Her father and brother ignored her from the time they had made their decision to the time she left. She was stripped of her beautiful kimono and jewels. A servant quickly dressed her in a simple, drab yukata. Then the two guards led her from the Miakage household._

"They were good men, those two. The preciousness of a female is drilled into all Oni from a young age. To see me treated so was painful for all the servants and guards of the house. They left me in Kyoto. Despite that it was obviously my father's intent that I be left with nothing, they managed to slip me enough money to buy a few meals. Then they disappeared and I never saw them again," Nemu's eyes were closed as she spoke, reliving memories from so long ago, "The money ran out quickly, and I was left scavenging on the streets, avoiding men with ill intent, and steadily nearing death. Even with our accelerated healing, an Oni can still starve to death. The process is longer and slower than it would be for humans. Our bodies constantly attempt to regenerate, despite the inevitable. Fortunately, I was saved by the kindness of another."

Nemu lay in an alleyway, skeletal and pale. Her beautiful, porcelain skin was covered in grime from weeks of living on the streets. Her yukata, the same one she had been dropped off in, was torn and dirty. Her hair, matted with all sorts of disgusting elements, partially hid her face as she stared up at the sky. She was dying. Rather than sell her body like so many others, she had attempted to scrounge through garbage and sometimes steal from market stands. It was not enough to sustain her, though, and she grew weaker by the day. She lost the energy to scrounge and steal. All that was left was for her to die alone and unwanted by anyone.

The midday sun was blocked by the building she lay next to. People passed by on the street at the mouth of the alley, taking no notice of the woman within. They were much too busy going about their daily lives to offer aid to a dying beggar like her. Dimly, she wondered if her body would be discovered directly after she died. Would she begin to decay, a stench rising from the alley until someone was forced to remove her, or would her Oni powers of regeneration cause her to remain as she was?

A shadow fell across her as she lay in the dirt of the alley, her eyes glazed, her ribs protruding grotesquely. Her breath hitched slightly and her eyes shifted, a spark of fear entering them. This was the end. Someone was going to take advantage of her helpless state and kill her, perhaps dragging her to a less public place and subjecting her to their own carnal desires before they finished her. At least, that is what she thought.

The sight that met her eyes was not that of a leering man, however. Instead, she found herself looking into the wide, innocent brown eyes of a child. The child blinked at her curiously, kneeling down and reaching out with one small hand to push Nemu's matted hair back from her face.

"Hey," the child said, "Your eyes are pretty."

_Under normal circumstances, Nemu would have smiled. Of course the child was entranced by the odd color of her eyes. They were a dark, inky blue, almost black but not quite. As it was, she merely stared

at the child's small face. She could not be older than six. Her hair was a lovely dark brown, tied up elegantly behind her head. She wore a small, blue kimono, tied at the waist with a purple sash. Her brow furrowed in concern when Nemu did not answer._

"Are you okay?" she asked, pushing Nemu's hair back further, "Are you sick?"

Nemu could not find the will to reply.

"Jun!"

The child looked toward the mouth of the alley, where a female voice was calling.

"Jun! Where are you?"

"Down here, mommy!"

A woman wearing a pink yukata rounded the corner, her face slightly panicked. Directly behind her was another woman and her daughter, who appeared to be older than the one who had found Nemu.

"Jun!"

The first woman knelt down next to her daughter, pulling her into a hug.

"Oh, thank kami, I was so worried! You shouldn't wander off like that!"

"But, mommy, I saw this lady," Jun replied, extracting herself from her mother's arms, "See," she gingerly touched Nemu's forehead, "She has pretty eyes."

Jun's mother looked down at Nemu, observing the dying woman. She was obviously repulsed by the state she was in, but her expression was mixed with pity.

"Yes, she does."

The second child came forward. This girl appeared to be a few years older than Jun. She squatted down, wearing her own pink Kimono. She looked at Nemu seriously for a moment. Then she turned and looked at her own mother.

"Can we keep her?"

The second girl's mother scolded her.

"Emiko, this isn't a joke. And no, we cannot keep her. But we can help her," she looked at Jun's mother, "Mai?"

Mai nodded, her eyes not leaving Nemu.

"My husband's business is going well enough to care for her."

_"You won't have to do it alone. My husband's tea shop is also doing

well. We can help each other and get her back on her feet."_

"They took me back to Mai's home. I found out that Emiko's mother's name was Riko. They were both young, their daughters were their first and only children. They were joined in their efforts by another business man's wife, Miko. She had her own daughter, Airi, who was the youngest of the three children. As they questioned me about where I had come from and how I had ended up in my current state, I told them almost the whole truth, omitting only the fact that I was an Oni, because it would be unbelievable. Over the time that I spent with them, I quickly befriended all three women, and came to love each of the children dearly. Their families assisted me in getting settled in a new home with a job at Mai's husband's business. I lived in Kyoto quite happily for nearly five years. Then I moved to Edo, promising to keep in contact with my friends. My time in Edo was fairly uneventful. I procured a job in a flower shop, making just enough money to live."

Nemu paused, giving everyone in the room the feeling that whatever she was about to say was very important.

"It was while in Edo that I began to pick up on the movements of the Oni clans. Kazama, of course, was still on his hunt. My own clan, the Miakage, had lost their head, the man I once called father. My brother was leading the family. I did not think much of this transition in power at the time, but my carelessness came back to haunt me. As a precaution, I returned to Kyoto, knowing that, should my brother take interest in me, he would trace my trail to my friends, who had remained faithfully correspondent. I hoped that by going back, I could protect the people I held dear if need should arise."

Nemu stood before the storefront, looking at the door. It had been seven years since she left Kyoto for Edo. In that time, she had, of course, visited her own home on very special occasions, but she had never stayed longer than a few weeks at most. She smiled at the prospect of once again being able to spend time with the women who had saved her from not only death, but the isolation her family had intended for her. Despite her reasons for returning, she was glad to be back.

She stepped inside the shop.

It had not changed since her last visit, nearly a year and a half earlier. She quickly sought out the section of the shop that she knew Mai's husband would be in. When he caught sight of her, he stood, smiling.

"Welcome back, Nemu-san," he said, bowing, "It has been too long."

Nemu smiled, bowing in return.

"Indeed it has."

Mai's husband looked her over.

"I see the years have been kind to you. You don't seem to have aged at all since you moved to Edo!" he commented

Nemu felt a flash of uneasiness but hid it with another smile.

"It's a gift."

He laughed.

"It must be. Mai is upstairs, by the way, since I'm assuming you came to see her. I'd show you the way, but I can't leave the shop unmanned," his face clouded, "There are some rogue samurai who have been extorting money from the local shopkeepers. I can't risk being gone and having them come in to tear the place up."

Nemu nodded.

"I understand. I am sorry that this trouble looms over you."

He sighed.

"Hopefully someone will come to defend us against them. There's been word of a group that came into town recently. I've heard that they've been fighting the rogues."

Nemu's eyebrows rose.

"How noble."

"Maybe. Or maybe they're another, even worse group that's hoping to run the other group out for their own gain," he shrugged, "Your guess is as good as mine."

Nemu nodded.

"Thank you for telling me. I'll keep it in mind."

With that, she went upstairs to speak with Mai.

She found both mother and daughter working to prepare a meal. She knocked politely and waited to be noticed. Mai looked up. As soon as she laid eyes on Nemu, her face broke into a smile and she hurried over to embrace her.

"You didn't write ahead!" she cried.

"I wanted to surprise you," returning the embrace.

"I'm surprised," Mai pulled back slightly, grinning, "Are you just coming to visit?"

Nemu shook her head.

"I'm moving back to Kyoto. I was starting to feel lonely in Edo and decided to move back here."

Jun turned from where she was stirring a pot, looking over her shoulder. Nemu smiled. The young woman was eighteen, as beautiful and strong willed as her mother. She smiled back, her brown eyes dancing.

"Hello, auntie," she said, "I'm glad you're back."

"So am I, Jun."

Miko and Riko were overjoyed by Nemu's return as well, though Miko was a bit more reserved in her celebration. She was the serious one of the trio of business men's wives, always the level headed voice of reason. Riko was a bit more outgoing than the other two, and had suggested that they celebrate Nemu's return with a large dinner between the three families. Nemu was honored by their efforts to welcome her back to Kyoto.

"Word of my brother died down and I believed that the threat would pass. I decided to stay in Kyoto until it became suspicious that I was not aging. I resumed work at one of my friends' shops and once again found myself happily immersed in a loving family who was not related to me by blood. During that time, the Shinsengumi made their name known in Kyoto. The girls were warned to avoid them. Emiko, who was the most hot headed and rebellious, took this as a personal challenge. Jun tagged along, thinking to keep her out of trouble, though that was indeed a monumental task."

Nemu sat in her kitchen, reading a book silently. Voices outside caused her to look up. She rose to see who might be calling on her so late in the evening. Upon checking the front door, she saw Emiko and Jun. The former was grinning broadly while the latter looked at her in a long suffering manner.

"Good evening, girls," Nemu smiled.

"Nemu! I met a man!" Emiko squealed, grabbing the older woman's hands in her own, "I have to tell you all about him!

Nemu laughed.

"Alright, alright, come inside."

The two girls followed her inside. They kneeled with her at the low kitchen table. Emiko grinned like a fool the entire time. Nemu looked at the young woman as soon as she was seated. Emiko was twenty one and yet unmarried. She had the luxury of attempting to find a man whom she could love, and enter into marriage because of the desires of her own heart. She had been looking hard, for she desperately wanted romance, but none of the men she came across seemed to be the right one.

"Now, about this man..." Nemu began.

Emiko immediately jumped in.

"Oh, Nemu! He's wonderful! We were out in town today and a group of those rogues approached us, making lewd remarks about us. I was scared to do anything because there were so many of them. Then, all of the sudden, he was there. He and his friend stepped between us and the rogues and frightened them off. Then he asked if we were alright," her eyes became slightly dreamy, "He was so handsome. Tall and strong with those beautiful golden eyes."

"He is a captain of the Shinsengumi, Emiko," Jun put in, "Your mother had forbidden you to even be near them and you're acting smitten!"

Emiko looked at Jun, her eyes flashing.

"You talked with them too, Jun! They aren't like everyone says they are. If they were, they wouldn't have saved us. He's a good man, and I don't see why I can't like him."

"Needless to say, I was concerned for them. As the months passed, Emiko and this man continued seeing each other. I met him once and confirmed that he was trustworthy. I then took on the responsibility of backing her when her parents became privy to this information. Jun, despite her earlier distrust of the Shinsengumi, also found herself falling in love. The third girl, Airi, was quick to follow. They seemed quite happy in their growing relationships with these men, and so, I was happy for them. However, as time went on, Kazama began to attack the Shinsengumi in search of his missing bride. The girls' relationships with them drew his attention and he quickly traced them back to me."

Nemu rounded the corner into her sitting room and found a tall, blonde man waiting for her. Her heart stopped as she took in his proud face, his cold, red eyes. He observed her in a bored fashion.

"So, it is you. I had a hunch that this is where you ended up."

Nemu quickly gathered herself. She refused to fear this man. After all, she too was an Oni.

"I doubt you came by to exchange pleasantries, Chikage Kazama. What is your business with me?"

His eyebrows rose very slightly.

"Very well, since you are so eager to know my intentions, I will tell you. I want you to sever ties with the humans you have come to call 'friends'."

Nemu stiffened.

"Why?"

His red eyes glittered as he regarded her steadily.

"For two reasons. The foremost being that what I am about to do will cause the young women great emotional turmoil. The Shinsengumi has pushed my patience to the limit. I have decided to exact revenge for their withholding of my bride."

Nemu's eyes narrowed. She was surprised to hear that the Yukimura girl had hidden among the Shinsengumi, but that matter did not concern her. What did concern her was that Kazama had just made an indirect threat against her beloved family

"What do you plan to do?" she asked.

His eyes glinted maliciously.

_"I will curse the Shinsengumi with my own power. When the time comes

that each of them falls in the war that is brewing, they will not have the eternal sleep that follows death. They will simply sleep until a time when the way of the sword is dead and all that they have fought for is forgotten, trampled upon by the future generations," his lips twitched upward into a cruel smile, "And when they awaken in such a time that everything they have ever lived for is meaningless, they will never be able to escape. They will never die a hero's death. For no weapon will be able to kill them. They will be undead, and therefore ageless. They will not be able to die at a happy old age. They will not be able to commit seppaku for honor's sake. Those who dared to mock the Oni by becoming Rasetsu will be forced to bear the consequences by retaining their alternate form, never able to be rid of it. That is my revenge."_

Nemu's eyes had gone wide as she listened to him. A single tear ran down her cheek at the cruelty of his curse.

"You are a monster."

His smile vanished, replaced by his usual frown.

"Your time among the humans has made you soft," he scoffed, closing his eyes, "But you are still an honored female, so I shall still give you my second reason. Your brother has gotten word of your friendship and set his sights on them. The parent are old enough that he will leave them be. The daughters, however," he opened his eyes and regarded her, "He will kill them in the worst ways imaginable."

Nemu felt shock course through her. She sank to her knees, her tears flowing freely now. Kazama looked at her with an expression caught between contempt and pity. He moved to the door.

"What you do with what I've told you is up to you. I do not care. I only told you because I resent your family for casting you out," he glanced back at her, "You would have made a fine bride before you were corrupted by the humans."

Then he was gone.

Nemu bent so that her forehead was pressed against the floor, her tears falling to wet the wood.

"You bastards..."

"I began to see the signs of my brother's movements. He was becoming restless and would soon strike," Nemu closed her eyes, sighing, "So I revealed my true form to my old friends. They were shocked, fearful at first, but they did not cast me aside. After all, I was still the woman they had known for so many years. I told them of my brother's plan, convincing them that the best choice would be to allow me to use my power to send their daughters somewhere safe. After much argument, they agreed. I made preparations quickly, knowing that my brother would soon realize my plan. I would use my own power to transport the girls somewhere safe. What I did not realize was that my 'spell' would work better than I had ever imagined. I was still young in the standards of my people. I had not trained with my power as Kazama had, and preferred not to use it. These were both factors when things went wrong. Instead of simply being sent to a safe place, the three were catapulted through time. I failed utterly, making

retrieval impossible," a tear leaked from her closed eyes, "I have never forgiven myself for that.

"Upon realizing what had happened, I made a new plan. I would wait for them to reappear in the future time. Due to my regenerative powers, I lived long after the death of my friends. I worked, saved and invested, leaving myself with a rather large sum of money that I stored away for emergency use. For over a century I wandered the globe, running from my brother until he once again faded into anonymity. I battled Kazama numerous times, attempting to kill him in return for his monstrous curse. I, of course, never won, but neither did he kill me. He too disappeared a few decades after the war, grieved that his bride had been caught up in his curse as well.

"In the late nineteen hundreds, I moved to America, knowing that this was the most probable place for my failed 'spell' to send the children of my beloved friends. I was correct. In the nineties, they appeared. They were not, however, the women I had last seen, but children. Left with no memory of anything but their language and their names, they were quickly taken in as orphans and renamed. No longer were they Jun, Emiko, and Airi. Instead, their American care takers gave them the names Jade, Emily, and Amber. Heartbroken by my compounded failure and desperate to right it, I made sure to place myself in your paths as you grew older," she looked at each of the girls, "It was my duty to care for you after taking you from your birth mothers. A duty that I am still attempting to carry out.

"When I heard that you were regaining memories of your original lives, I became worried. After all, I had heard rumors that the Shinsengumi were reawakening and if the two groups met, it would draw dangerous attention again, so I desperately attempted to keep you apart. Unfortunately, this proved to be impossible," she looked at Kondou, "That is my story."

9. Reclaimed

Greetings, my lovelies~! I apologize for the wait, but my dreams have been filled with Anatomy and Physiology lately and I have had no muse for writing. I finally managed to get going on this chapter, though! Sorry if it seems short. Please read and review~!

* * *

><p>The silence that fell over the table was long and profound. It lay like a heavy wool over the occupants of the room. No one made eye contact, for they were all much too wrapped up in their own thoughts. Nemu stared at the table cloth, waiting for some sort of response to her words.<p>

The response came in the form of Jade slowly pushing her chair back. She rose on shaky legs.

"Excuse me," she said, her eyes brimming with tears.

She quickly fled the room, feeling the weight of numerous stares on her back. The heaviest of them was that given by a pair of green, catlike eyes. She ran across the floor to the stairs, hurrying to get to her room before her tears came. She did not make it further than halfway up the stairs before she broke into soft sobs, slowly

lowering herself onto one of the steps.

Emily's eyes tightened when the sound of Jade's quite crying floated back into the room. She stood and left the room, going through the kitchen and out the back door.

Amber stared at her hands, which were folded in her lap. She was not sure what to do. She was upset by what she had just heard. She was angry at Nemu for keeping this a secret. She was confused by her underlying feelings for Saito. She was saddened by the realization that she would never meet her birth parents. She had always harbored the hope that she would one day be reunited with her family. Now, however, that dream was crushed. After all, how could she meet her parents if they had died a century ago?

As Nemu spoke, Amber had felt memories rising to the forefront of her mind. She remembered her solemn mother talking with her jovial father. She remembered taking walks through the streets of Kyoto. She remembered being dragged along with Jun and Emiko on their misadventures. Other, less distinct memories appeared. Flashes of her parent's faces, sunny days, stormy nights, and times spent laughing with her friends sprinted across her mind. Most of all, though, she remembered Saito. She clearly recalled the first time he had given her his soft smile, the gentle caress of his calloused hand on her face, the way he murmured her name when there was no one else to hear, and the first time he had pressed his lips to her forehead, beneath the sakura tree. So long ago, they had been so very close.

Amber's hands trembled in her lap and she felt tears welling in her eyes. She did not want to get up and draw attention to herself, but neither did she want to break down crying in front of these people. Her shoulders shook very slightly as she attempted to hold back her tears.

A slender, masculine hand came to rest over hers, halting the trembling.

Her eyes moved slowly up his arm, which was covered in a long, black sleeve. She saw the slight bulge of his bicep and deltoid, the skin of his pale neck, and, finally, she met his dark eyes. Saito looked at her seriously, his expression solemn. His hand briefly squeezed hers.

"Are you alright?" his lips barely moved as he spoke in a murmur.

She began to nod, but then she paused. She bit her lip and shook her head, the tears building in her eyes. She despised crying, especially in front of others, mainly because she thought it made her seem weak.

Saito's brows drew together ever so slightly. He stood, taking her hands in his and drawing her to her feet. He led her from the dining room, his hand wrapped tightly around hers. She felt the other occupants in the room watching them. Okita smirked at their clasped hands, but the expression quickly vanished when another soft sob floated in from the stairs. Harada stared toward the kitchen, frowning slightly, no doubt thinking of Emily. Shinipachi gave a half hearted grin. It seemed even he, in all his boisterousness, felt the

weight of the information that had just been delivered. Heisuke shifted uncomfortably, looking as if he wanted to go to Jade, but his eyes were nervously darting to Okita as he no doubt remembered the older man's threat to kill him if he touched her. It was obvious from his expression that he hated to leave the crying girl alone. Kondou watched Saito and Amber leave with a saddened expression. Nemu looked miserable as she stared at their joined hands.

All of this Amber took in with a glance. She turned her head back toward Saito as she passed through the doorway, into the main room. In the center, on the open stairwell, sat Jade, her face buried in her hands, her body quivering. Saito glanced up at her and his frown deepened. His pace quickened as he pulled Amber behind him, obviously feeling that Jade deserved privacy. Amber looked up at her friend, understanding how she felt. Jade had the closest relationship with Nemu and was no doubt feeling the sting of betrayal much more than Amber herself. The dark haired girl's tears began to spill over, the sight of Jade acting as the last blow to her wavering control.

She lost sight of the older girl as Saito dragged her into the sitting room. He released her hand just long enough to close the door. Morning light streamed through the curtains. Dimly, Amber realized that none of them had even had breakfast yet. This thought was blown away in a storm of returning mixed emotion. She quickly turned away from Saito as the tears spilled over, running down her cheeks in hot, wet trails. She wrapped her arms around herself, her fingers digging into her flesh. Saito paused, his hand still on the door. Then, slowly, as if he were approaching a wounded animal, he moved to her side and gripped her shoulders. He gently turned her around. She opened her eyes to look up at him. Her lip trembled as she tried not to completely break down.

Saito looked at her tenderly, more comfortable with showing affection since it was just the two of them. His left hand moved from her shoulder to her cheek and he gently wiped her tears away. She was highly embarrassed that he was seeing her in such an emotional state. All embarrassment vanished, however, when he pulled her into his arms. His left hand came up to gently stroke her hair as his other arm wrapped around her waist. She pressed her forehead against his shoulder and clutched at his black shirt, allowing herself to be comforted by his embrace. He rested his cheek against her hair, closing his eyes.

"It's alright," he murmured.

Amber made a small, choked noise. He was not saying that her situation was alright, that Nemu's keeping secrets was alright, but that it was alright for her to cry. He was telling her that, despite all that had happened, his death and her apparent catapult into the future, his feelings remained unchanged. This made Amber cry even harder. The previous day she had not even known his name, now, she was willing to let him hold her and comfort her. Why? Because she remembered him and trusted him. She knew that he cared for her, perhaps even loved her. It was an odd feeling, having the memories of Airi mixed in with her memories as Amber. However, as Airi's memories returned to her, her feelings for Saito grew in intensity. She relaxed into his embrace, her confused emotions draining from her in the form of tears.

When she reached the point of coherency, she began to

speak.

"You...you died," she whispered.

Saito opened his eyes slowly, looking over her head at the opposite wall.

"Yes," he replied, just as softly.

A fresh wave of tears fell down her cheeks.

"D-did you know?" she asked, "About the c-curse?"

He continued to gently stroke her hair, his fingertips gently dragging through it.

"No, not at the time. The last thing I remember is dying in battle. The next thing I knew, I woke up, lying on a bed, my wounds healed without any sign of their having been there. I don't know who retrieved me or how long I had been there, but I found my weapons and a set of clothes laid next to me."

Amber silently took this in.

"I'm sorry, Hajime-kun" she said softly, "I feel like I abandoned you."

Hajime pulled back slightly and looked down at her.

"No. If anyone is to take the blame, it should be me. I fought my hardest in that battle. I wanted to return you, but I failed. I fell," his lips quirked in one of his small smiles, "But none of that matters now, Amber. We're together, against all odds."

Amber looked at him with wide eyes, her tears finally spent. Then she gave him a hesitant smile in return.

"Yes. We have a second chance."

* * *

><p>Emily sat dejectedly on a branch of one of the numerous trees in the back yard, her blue eyes focused on the leaves that had just begun to change in color. She stared without seeing, her emotions too volatile at the moment for her to focus on anything else. She felt betrayed and angry. She wondered how Nemu could have kept secrets from them like that. They were supposed to be like a family, and yet the woman had hidden their pasts from them. She scowled down at the ground. It made her especially angry that, though Nemu had known what was going on with Jade's dreams, Ambers visions, and even Emily's fascination with the color dark gold, she had remained silent, and would have done so for an even longer period of time if the men had not appeared.<p>

"Tch," she crossed her arms over her chest, muttering under her breath.

The air around her was still warm as summer clung to the world, uneager to release its hold and allow the crispness of autumn replace it. It was a nice day, the sun was already bright as it continued its

climb from the eastern horizon. Emily sighed as she sat straddling the thick branch, nearly fifteen feet off the ground. She unconsciously kicked her feet as she looked up into the higher bows of the tree.

The back door suddenly swung open, causing her eyes to dart toward it. Harada stepped outside. He frowned slightly as his eyes scanned the yard, looking for her. The movement she created in the tree caught his attention and he smiled slightly, no doubt remembering that it had always been Emiko's habit to climb up something when she wanted to be alone. He walked to the base of the tree and looked up at her, his golden eyes sparkling in amusement.

Emily stared back, feeling her cheeks involuntarily warm. She had regained many of her memories during Nemu's tale, and was embarrassed that the older woman had seen fit to include Emily's, Emiko's, feelings for Harada. She knew it did not really matter, since they had indeed been courting before the..._incident_, but she still did not want him to hear that she had almost swooned over him the day they met.

"Well, are you going to come out of that tree so we can talk?" he asked, cocking his head to the side so that his reddish hair fell partially over his face

Her cheeks darkened further and she looked away, trying not to think about how utterly gorgeous she found him to be. His golden eyes and gentle smile were so inviting, telling her that if she just came down, he would hold her and tell her everything was alright, just like he used to. However, Emily was too proud to allow him to see her in a distraught state, no matter their history together.

"No," she muttered, pulling her feet up and hugging her legs to her chest, easily sitting on the thick branch.

His smile faded somewhat and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Do I have to come up and get you?" he asked, his voice still pleasant but carrying a threatening undercurrent.

She looked back down at him, her blue eyes calculating.

"You wouldn't," she said after a pause.

He sighed, closing his eyes. When they opened again, they were slightly predatory. She felt her own eyes widen in response. She had worried him, was worrying him. He wanted to help her, and she was refusing him. She remembered that while he had always been gentle with her, there were times when he had been firm, stubbornly forcing her to accept his help. They were both of strong personalities, and, every so often, their personalities clashed.

"I will," he reached up and gripped the lowest branch.

Emily winced slightly. If she had managed to climb the tree so easily, it would be a small feat for Harada. He was more athletic than she, and stronger. She quickly looked for some sort of escape. She did not want to tell him how she felt. She did not want the man she had once fallen in love with to witness her weakness.

She waited until he had swung into the tree before suddenly moving, dropping from her branch and landing on the ground in a crouch. Once she had regained her footing, she took off running back toward her house. She planned to sprint for her room and lock herself inside until he left her alone. She realized however, as she heard him make an exasperated noise, that she had miscalculated. Harada was much faster than she. In her past life she had never attempted to run from him, partially because it was impossible to do so while wearing a kimono or yukata. Now, even though she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, she was still not up to the task.

She was three quarters of the way to the door when his large hand locked around her wrist, jerking her to a stop. She was thrown off balance for a moment. As soon as it returned she began to try to tug her wrist from his grasp, planting her feet in the grass and attempting to throw her body weight into the pull. His expression was caught between annoyance and amusement as he looked down at her, his fingers still gripping her wrist firmly. He yanked on her wrist, pulling her toward him before using the momentum to easily pick her up and throw her over his shoulder. She froze for a moment, any chance of escape effectively cut off. She then made an outraged noise and pounded one fist against his back.

"Sano! Put me down!" she cried, not seeming to notice that she had dropped any honorifics and begun calling him by his first name.

Sano held her easily, smirking slightly.

"Not until you promise not to run off."

The curtains at the kitchen window were pulled aside and Heisuke's and Shinipachi's faces appeared. They had undoubtedly been drawn by the commotion. As soon as they saw what was going on, they burst into laughter. Sanosuke shot them a glare and they retreated just as quickly as they had come, still snickering.

Emily continued struggling for a few minutes more but was unable to escape. Finally, she went limp.

"Finished?" Sano asked.

She sighed turning her head to look at him.

"Yes."

Gently, he set her down on her feet, steadying her by placing his large hands on her shoulders. His wise gold eyes looked down at her with concern. She looked away, unwilling to meet his gaze. He gave a small sigh, bringing his hand up to touch her cheek. She shivered slightly as his fingertips brushed over her skin.

"Emily," he murmured.

In that murmuring of her name was a question, one that Sano would never truly ask because it would make her feel weak. _What can I do to help you?_

Emily looked up at him, all childishness on her part and playfulness on his gone. The seriousness of the moment struck her again.

Hesitantly, Emily wrapped her arms around him.

"Just...don't leave me again," she said softly, resting her head against his chest, finally relenting and displaying a rare moment of fragility, "I remembered almost everything, Sano. I don't want to lose you again."

She pushed aside her feelings of betrayal and confusion. As cliché as it sounded, their relationship was the one thing she was sure of at present. She remembered the love they had shared, still shared. It was ironic. She had always been the most boy-crazy of the trio of friends, but even she had never been able to hold down a boyfriend for more than a couple weeks at most. It had never felt right. Now she knew why. Her heart belonged to Sanosuke Harada, and it always had.

Sano's strong arms wrapped around her tightly. She felt him rest his chin on top of her head.

"You won't. I'll always be right here for you."

Emily closed her eyes, knowing that this was not just an empty promise. If Kazama's curse had done its work, Sano would not age or be killed in combat. He would always be there, just as he was. It was a bittersweet thing, knowing this. Emily shook the thought off. They would make the most of it and face their troubles as they came. After all, he obviously still loved her and she felt much the same. They were both strong and stubborn, and it would be difficult to tear such a pair apart.

10. Transversing Time

So this chapter is short and mushy, but it's what I wanted. I don't really have more to say because, well, one of my best friends is missing and it's really hitting me hard. Pray for her family and friends, please.

* * *

><p>Jade coughed lightly, her throat feeling congested from the amount of sniffing she had done. She stared at the step beneath her feet with red, puffy eyes, her body trembling slightly. Her long brown hair hung loosely about her face, covering her shoulders and upper back. She gave another soft hiccup, her emotional turmoil having not quite finished running its course. Jade raised one hand and wiped at her eyes and cheeks for the umpteenth time. How Souji would tease her later. He would not dare do it now, while she was still hurting, but when it had passed and everything had settled down, he would tease her mercilessly. He always did.<p>

At first Jade had wondered why he did not follow her. Then she had remembered: Souji hated to see her cry. In one of his rare, vulnerable moments he had confessed to Jun that when she cried, it made him feel powerless. Even if he could kill the person or thing that was the cause, the damage had already been done. He had decided it was best for both of them to allow her to cry and then he would comfort her when she was more coherent.

She stared down at the doorway of the dining room, knowing that he would emerge as soon as he was sure her sobs had died down. She breathed deeply to quiet the hiccupping. As she had thought, when the sounds of crying had disappeared, Souji was suddenly at her side, as if he had used magic to appear. He murmured softly to her, not at all the sarcastic killer he usually was. Instead he was sweet and gentle. He took her hand and drew her up to her feet before leading her upstairs and into her bedroom, away from the prying eyes and ears of the others.

As he turned away from the door, his green eyes moving to her face, she remembered the first time she had seen those eyes.

Jun stood in front her parents' shop, observing those who bustled up and down the street before her. She smiled, enjoying simply not having anything better to do than watch those around her as they went about their daily lives. Men and women wearing a spectrum of colors crowded about and jostled past one another. Smells of food and sake wafted out of restaurants up and down the street. An old woman sat at the mouth of an alleyway with a stand of fruit, selling it for a low price. A few people stopped to buy from her, glad for the treat to ward against the summer heat. Jun smiled and decided to go and buy a piece, as the natural sweetness of fruit could never go awry. She went back inside to retrieve some coins before returning and making her way across the street.

The old woman looked up and, recognizing her, smiled happily. She reached across to a section of the stand that was dominated by nashi, which she knew that Jun enjoyed immensely. However, as she reached, her body turned so that she was facing down the street, she froze, having caught sight of something. Her smile faded into an almost fearful expression.

Jun frowned at this and turned her head to see what had frightened the old woman so. Her eyes widened. The people who had previously been crushing against each other in the street, had all shifted to the sides, pressing against the walls of the buildings and walking with their heads down and their eyes on the ground. The cause of the sudden fear that had settled over the citizens was a squad of blue cloaked men who were walking in formation. Jun, despite being in the middle of the street, felt her body seize.

Shinsengumi!

Her hand clenched around the coins so that the metal was pressed hard into her skin. Her parents had warned her not to be caught out alone with the men of the shinsengumi nearby, as they were not to be trusted. She had been told by the women of their neighborhood never to draw their attention. Briefly, the thought of fleeing back into her father's shop entered her mind. However, it was too late, the man at the forefront of the group had pinioned her with his gaze, a slow smirk stretching across his lips.

Jun stared at him. He was tall and proud and bore himself with an almost feline grace. His green eyes danced with an almost cruel mirth at the apparent fear in her own.

"Tsukino-san!" the old woman at the fruit stand hissed loudly Jun's surname in an attempt to break her reverie.

Jun looked toward her, her eyes still wide. When she faced the man again, he stood only a foot away, looking down at her. He appeared to be about her age, but something told her that he was much more experienced in the ways of the world than she. He gave her a crooked smile.

"You're in our way...Tsukino-san, was it?"

Jun swallowed dryly.

"H-hai."

His smile widened.

"Ma, ma, you seemed frightened. Are we really so scary?"

Jun's eyes flickered to the men standing behind him. Indeed, they did not look as frightening as their captain. They seemed no more dangerous than her own father. A few even smiled at her reassuringly. Their captain, however, was a different matter. There was something about him that made her wish that he would look anywhere but at her with those enchanting eyes of his. He reminded her of a wolf, beautiful, graceful, and deadly.

"No, just you," she spoke without thinking.

A few of the men chuckled as she brought her hand up to her mouth, a slightly horrified expression crossing her face. The captain's eyes widened momentarily. Then he laughed.

"Very observant," he closed one eye, winking at her, "I'm the scariest of them all."

She blushed slightly at this, wondering at his apparent change in attitude.

"Okita-san, we should move on," one of the men said.

Okita, still smiling, raised a hand in acknowledgement. His gaze lingered on Jun for a moment, his smile not reaching his eyes. He observed her like one may observe an interesting puzzle. Then he moved to walk past her. His arm brushed hers and he spoke softly.

"Nice meeting you, Tsukino-chan."

Souji leaned back against the door, looking at her with a soft but still slightly guarded expression. As he stood there in the same dress slacks and white shirt from the previous night, his tie missing, his sleeves pulled up over lean, muscular arms, Jade could not help thinking, as she had the day she met him that he was beautiful. He shook his hair out of his face, his gaze never leaving her.

"...Are you alright?"

Jade nodded.

"I was just...shocked."

He remained silent as she wiped her eyes. Then he looked up at the ceiling, as though pondering something.

"It would upset you if I killed her."

Jade stared at him for a moment, not sure if he was serious. Then she laughed, the sound slightly distorted by the congestion of her throat.

"Yes it would."

He heaved a sigh, wearing an almost comical expression of long suffering, his eyes falling closed.

"Yare, yare, you're making this difficult for me."

She smiled looking down. This had always been his way of cheering her up. He would tease her, make her laugh, and, hopefully, cause her to forget her troubles. He opened one eye to look at her, his lips quirking upward. Then he pushed himself off the wall and took a step closer. Jade tilted her head back to look up at him. There was a moment of silence between them. Then, hesitantly, she raised a hand and placed it on his chest.

"Do you still...?"

He smiled softly and shook his head.

"It seems death really is the cure-all."

Jade's brows drew together.

"Souji, that isn't funny."

He gave a soft chuckle, his hand coming up to brush her hair back from where it had fallen in her face. She blushed as his fingertips touched her skin.

"Did you miss me, Jade-chan?"

She nodded.

"Yes...very much."

He paused for a moment.

"I was thinking about you...that night."

Jade's eyes widened.

Souji looked down at her with a melancholy expression.

"I would never have made it back to you anyway, Jade-chan. Even if I hadn't turned to dust after being wounded so many times. The tuberculosis would have killed me afterwards."

Jade flinched slightly when he spoke of his death. She had always disliked it when Souji spoke so easily of death and blood and horrific wounds. At first, she had been rather cross with him. Then she had realized that it was simply a part of who he was. Speaking of

such things did not affect him the way it affected others, for whatever reason.

A thought stuck her and she frowned suddenly.

"Souji..." she said slowly, "If you turned to dust...how did you reform?"

He blinked at the question. Then he shrugged.

"It's probably because of that damn Kazama's curse," his eyes narrowed dangerously as his lips curled in a sneer, "I'll be the one to kill him for sure."

Jade bit her lip slightly, looking at the floor. Her rampant emotions had calmed by this point, allowing her to focus on the present as well as the past she had with Souji. They had often talked of serious things, though he attempted to make light of them. Things like death, battle, and, once, marriage. Souji had confessed that, were he not a captain of the shinsengumi, and were he not dying of an incurable illness, he would seek her hand. This, of course, had sent Jun into a bout of stuttering and blushing that had caused Souji to laugh. Such had been the strength of their affection. The affection that was renewed between them, though lacking in the strength it once had. Jade supposed that a century of separation could do that to a relationship.

"If you face him," she said softly, "Be careful."

Souji chuckled. He took her chin in the crook of his finger and raised her face.

"I will. I won't leave you again, Jade."

She smiled then, an inexplicable happiness flooding through her. She and Souji truly had something that very few others possessed. They had a love that transversed time.

11. The Enemy

In this chapter, the plot is officially kicked off. I was so excited writing this. I want to thank all of my reviewers. If I named each of you individually, I would take up like half a page so I'll just say if you have reviewed this story, you are awesome. If I lack inspiration, all I have to do is go back and reread your reviews and suddenly, my muse returns. I also want to thank those who have expressed concern about my missing friend. It means a lot to me. Please, R&R! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

* * *

><p>The kitchen was a flurry of activity as brunch was prepared. It was too late in the morning for breakfast, but, after such a time of emotional stress, everyone was too hungry to wait until lunch. Nemu and Kondou had disappeared into the sitting room after Hajime and Amber vacated it. The quiet couple had made their way back to the dining room, where Heisuke and Shinipachi immediately complained that they were hungry. Emily had marched in a few minutes later with Harada trailing behind her and announced that she was going to make

brunch and Amber was going to help. Shinipachi and Heisuke had offered as well, but, despite the fact that the men had been reawakened a number of months earlier, only Hajime could be trusted with the stove. The others had to content themselves with fetching ingredients and other more mundane tasks.<p>

Brunch preparations were well underway when Souji and Jade finally came downstairs. They walked side by side, his arm about her waist. She was blushing as he teased her with a smirk, speaking in a low voice so that only she could hear. As they entered the kitchen, all activity ceased and the couple was subjected to numerous grins and stares. Even Hajime smiled slightly. Shinipachi and Heisuke snickered and nudged each other. Emily rolled her eyes at the public display of affection, though her lips were turned up in a smile. Amber's eyes moved from Souji's arm around Jade's waist to peek at Hajime, who stood at the stove, cooking pancakes. Then she blushed and refocused on mixing the batter for the pancakes.

Souji gave them all an annoyed look.

"Nani?" he demanded.

Shinipachi answered in Japanese, so quickly that Jade could not understand it. Souji's eye twitched. Then he laughed. His arm around her tightened, pulling her closer. He replied, insinuating that the other man was jealous that he did not have his own beautiful woman. Jade's face turned beet red. Emily muttered something about possessive boyfriends as she opened the lid of the pan containing the bacon. Shinipachi waved off Souji's comment and flexed his rather impressive arms, commenting that after the American women saw his superior prowess, they would be falling over each other to get to him. Sano laughed and turned it into an unconvincing cough, drawing a glare from his friend.

Emily shooed Saito out of her way as she retrieved a tray of biscuits from the oven. She set them on a towel on the counter. Sano reached around her, as though to swipe one off the tray. She slapped his hand away.

"Don't be a biscuit thief like Amber!"

Amber giggled slightly, causing Hajime to smile.

"Biscuit thief?" he asked in an undertone.

"I'll tell you later."

Brunch was finished with many more bouts of laughter and good natured verbal jabs. The table was set with a basket of biscuits next to a large bowl of sausage gravy, courtesy of Emily. It was joined by a plate heaped with bacon, a tray of pancakes, accompanied by syrup and butter, the leftover sausage that had not been used in the gravy, a bowl of fresh fruit, a bowl of scrambled eggs, and yet another bowl, this one filled with potato hash. A jug of milk and a large carton of orange juice had been set out as well. Plates were distributed and the food was divided. Amber soon found out that if she wanted something specific, Hajime was more than willing to get it for her, even if it meant threatening Heisuke with the butter knife. Jade simply waited until a bowl or plate of food was passed her way before partaking in the food. Shinipachi took to purposefully reaching for

the same thing that Emily was at the same time, irritating her to no end and leading to her attempting to stab his hand with her spoon when he attempted to take the fruit from her. Harada mildly reprimanded his friend for attempting to take a woman's food. The muscular man then resigned himself to stealing from Heisuke, even though there was plenty to go around.

Kondou and Nemu returned at that point. The former Shinsengumi commander smiled broadly at the obvious high spirits that his men were in. Nemu, who's expression had been grave, softened slightly in response. The two took their seats at the table and served themselves.

Souji's eyes lingered on his father figure, observing his expression and body language.

"Has something been decided, Kondou-san?"

The table went quiet.

Kondou blinked. Then he laughed somewhat sheepishly.

"Yare, I can never get anything past you, Souji," he folded his hands in his lap, "Yes, Miakage-san and I have finished exchanging information and have come to a consensus," his kind eyes were slightly troubled as he looked around the table at each of them in turn, "Based on our combined findings, it is obvious that the enemy is on the move. Miakage-san has been keeping an eye on the Oni underworld for some time now and it seems that both Kazama and her brother are stirring. Kazama will no doubt return to plague us again."

This drew scowls from around the table. Jade, Amber, and Emily struggled to keep up, not quite sure who 'the enemy' was. Kondou continued.

"As for the Miakage clan, it appears that over the years they have amassed a sort of crime syndicate. Their head, Miakage-san's brother, has received word of the three young ladies' reappearance."

Nemu cut in.

"And he seeks to finish what he meant to do so long ago."

Amber felt a cold sense of dread settle over her. An icy claw encircled her heart and she found it hard to breath. Someone wanted to kill her. I was the most terrifying feeling she had ever experienced. She must have given some outward sign of fear, because Hajime reached over and wrapped twined his slender fingers with hers, squeezing her hand softly. Emily's face cleared of all expression and her eyes hardened even as Sano glanced at her, his brow furrowed in worry. Jade clenched her hands on her knees and sat stiffly, looking at her half empty plate of food. Souji's eyes never drifted away from the two speakers as he draped an arm around her shoulders protectively. His lips curved in a humorless smirk, his green eyes cold and clear.

Heisuke scowled, his arms crossed over his chest.

"We would never let him do that!"

Kondou nodded.

"Exactly. Which is why Miakage-san and I have discussed a plan. It is likely that Kazama will join forces with this crime syndicate, at least as long as their goals coincide. This places both of our enemies together. Toshi, Sannan, Yukimura-san, and I will continue working from our base of operations on the other side of town to track their movements. The rest of you will remain here, in case our enemy attempts to attack in force. Since their main targets reside here, it is a likely possibility."

Shinipachi snorted.

"Let 'em come. It's not like they can kill us, thanks to that curse."

Nemu looked at him keenly.

"Perhaps not, but they can kill Jade, Amber, and Emily. I have no idea what else my 'spell' did to them. It is highly possible that they have ceased aging, since each of them has reached the age that they were when I transported them. Or that they are only aging very slowly, like I do. This would suggest that my power was partially transported to them and was lying dormant until their bodies returned to their original point. So, while it would be more difficult for them to die, it is still very much possible."

Emily cleared her throat slightly.

"So, let me get this straight. The Oni mafia is after us, fully intending to kill us. When you sent us into the future, you also transferred some of your power to us, making it harder for us to die. The plan is that the Shinsengumi are going to live in our home and protect us while Kondou-san and a few others will be staying elsewhere to track the mafia while we sit here and act as bait. Is that about right?"

Nemu shifted slightly.

"...Yes. If the Oni syndicate comes after you, I have not doubt that we could defeat them when fighting on our own terms."

Emily leaned back in her chair.

"Well, this'll be fun."

* * *

><p>Kaito finished tying his hakama as the door closed behind him. He glanced at the guards on either side of the door. They were both lesser Oni, not belonging to a noble family, their bloodlines polluted by human genetics. His voice held no inflection as he addressed them.<p>

"Take her back to her sisters after she dresses."

The guards bowed, murmuring confirmations.

Kaito's yellow eyes flicked away from them and he began to walk in an

unhurried manner down the hallway. The halfblooded Oni woman he had lain with was entertaining. Indeed, she had warranted a place among his favorite concubines. However, what he refused to allow her or any of his harem to bear his children. He would not be the sire of some bastard child with mixed blood. No. What he truly needed was a pureblooded female to carry on the Miakage line.

He passed numerous doorways on his way through the monstrous mansion that acted as his home and the headquarters of his syndicate. It was formed mainly of lesser Oni who were desperate for a place within the Oni society despite their tainted heritage. Occasionally he was joined by a noble whose standing was not as high as his own. To those, he awarded places of command, trusting the purebloods to keep control of the lesser Oni. He smirked slightly. How easy to control they all were.

As he rounded a corner, his smirk faded.

There was one who would not be controlled. Chikage Kazama. He had a higher social standing than Kaito, and, by all rights, was able to usurp his power and authority. Fortunately, Kazama had no interest in doing so. He only wished to use the syndicate's extensive resources to locate his lost bride, who had recently reawakened along with her human lover. Once she was found, Kazama planned to kill the lover, and finally take her as his own. Kaito, however, had different plans. He would allow Kazama to face the Shinsengumi's former second-in-command. While the battle was being waged however, he would take the Yukimura clan's princess. If that failed, he would take his sister, Nemu, instead. It was not uncommon for Oni nobles to inbreed in order to keep their lines pure. While he despised his sister, he would have no qualms about forcing her to bear his heir. It would be a suitable punishment for thwarting his killing of her human charges, he thought.

He mentally shrugged. Either way, his line would continue. Not only that, but, if his plan went accordingly, the human girls would be killed, leaving Nemu alone and without friendship. Finally, after over a century, he would accomplish what he had set out to do.

12. Unexpected

I'm sorry for my long absence. I've been having a horrible time with my computer. First, my power cord broke. Then, the day after I got a new one, my computer was hit by a virus. This is the reason for my long absence. I've been going crazy not being able to write! I'm posting this chapter from the library computer. I attempted to do it yesterday, but the little bugger erased everything I added before posting.

On another note, I want to thank you all for your prayers and encouragement in the face of my friend's disappearance. Last I heard, she was found safe and sound. Thank you all for your support!

Please enjoy the next chapter. There's some serious plot movement toward the end. Let me know if you think it's moving too fast.

* * *

><p>A week after Nemu's tale was told, the house was found to be full of activity as its occupants began to arise for the upcoming day. It had been agreed that all three women should quit their jobs. The money that Nemu had accumulated over the years was more than enough to support them, and it was unsafe for them to present themselves in such an open manner. Emily had been working at a nearby grocery store, Amber at the local library, and Jade as a waitress. While it was customary to submit a two weeks' notice before leaving, the three had pleaded that it was an urgent matter and managed to leave work within a few days of announcing their intention to quit.<p>

Due to the fact that all three of them were then home all day led to a rather full house. Kondou had left not long after the first breakfast the group had spent together, staying long enough to issue orders before driving off in the minivan that he had originally arrived in. Amber had found it rather odd that he knew how to drive, but, when she questioned Hajime about it, he had replied that he did not know where Kondou had attained the skill either. The sleeping arrangements had been made thereafter. Nemu would retain her apartment in the attic. Jade, Amber, and Emily would keep their rooms. It was agreed that Hajime would sleep on the second floor with them while Souji and Sanosuke remained on the first floor. If an attack came, it would be difficult for anyone to make it past those two, and, if they did, they would then have Hajime to contend with. Shinipachi and Heisuke took the basement floor, which included two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a rather nice sitting room in which Emily kept her gaming system. The boys had, of course, been making full use of the system over the past week.

Amber stood patiently outside the bathroom, holding her towel in one hand and her clothes in the other, waiting for Hajime to emerge. He had gotten up earliest and therefore gotten to shower first. Amber leaned against the wall. The water had been silenced a few minutes earlier, which meant he would soon emerge. She self consciously ran her fingers through her messy hair, attempting to calm her bed head before he saw her. She blushed slightly.

I'm acting like a smitten girl, she hugged her clothes closer to her chest.

The door open and the samurai emerged, drying his hair with a towel. He stopped when he saw her, lowering the towel and smiling softly.

"Good morning, Amber."

Her blush darkened at the sound of his deep voice.

"Good morning, Hajime," she responded quietly.

She made a conscious effort not to stare at his body. It certainly did not help that he wore a fitted, black, long sleeve shirt. Every movement he made was revealed to its fullest, his muscles rippling beneath the fabric.

He reached out and brushed his fingertips over her cheek.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, his hand still on her face.

"Y-yes."

Over the past week, Amber and Hajime's relationship had begun to grow. Amber was shy around him but Hajime did not let that deter him. He drew her out with light and gentle touches and whispered words. He took his small bits of success in stride. Occasionally, she would lean into his touch when he caressed her cheek or perhaps allow him to slip his arms around her and hold her close. Slowly but surely, their love was being rekindled.

"That's good," he said, his fingertips drifting distractingly across her cheekbone.

She felt her heart begin to pick up speed.

"Wh-what about you?" she mentally berated herself for being so nervous.

His smile widened almost imperceptibly.

"I slept very well. Thank you for asking."

Amber could not help but smile back.

Hajime stepped aside, allowing her to enter the bathroom. She stepped inside and then turned; looking at him until the door swung shut and blocked him from view. Then she sighed and rested her forehead against the door.

I was just praying for God to send me a good man...he sent me an angel instead.

She blushed at the terribly cliché line and hurriedly undressed in order to bathe.

* * *

><p>Emily walked out of her room in time to catch the end of the sweet moment between Hajime and Amber. She smiled and quickened her pace, unwilling to be the intrusive third party. However, that was only half the reason she moved faster. The other half was that she knew Sanosuke would be up by this time. She was hoping to make it downstairs in time to see him emerge from the bathroom in his towel. She had, so far, been unsuccessful. For the past three days, every time she made it downstairs, he was already fully dressed and sitting on the couch, waiting for her. She scowled slightly to herself. It may have been a very unladylike desire, but she was dying to see the rock hard body that she felt every time he held her close.<p>

A light blush covered her cheeks.

She ran lightly down the stairs, looking down at them as she did so. When she reached the bottom, she spun hopefully toward the bathroom. The door was open and the lights were off, which meant it was empty. She sighed slightly and turned toward the living room. As she did so, she came face to face with a large, bare chest.

"Ah!" she jumped back.

Shinipachi grinned.

"Morning," he said cheerfully, leaning a bit closer.

Emily felt her eye twitch. The large man took an unprecedented delight in teasing her every chance he got. She glanced down and was relieved to find that he had at least put on a pair of jeans. Kondou had returned a few hours after his original departure on the day of Nemu's revelation and delivered a great many bags of clothing, which obviously belonged to the men. They had offered to help do laundry instead of leaving it all to the women, since there were now so many people living in the house. Emily fought the urge to snigger at a memory of the day Heisuke had been doing it and discovered Jade's bra in the washer.

Jade sat on the couch with Souji, reading a book at one end while he sharpened and polished his sword at the other. Emily was playing a game of chess against Sano. To her distress, his years of combat experience had proved quite useful in the strategy game and she could do nothing to stop him from taking the victory again and again. He laughed softly at her frustrated expression as he once again toppled her king. Shinipachi sat at coffee table on which they played, giving Emily advice that only occasionally worked. Amber and Hajime had gone into the kitchen to make tea together and Nemu was running errands. A fire crackled in the fireplace, warding off the cool of autumn that threatened to penetrate the walls of the house. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

It was into this scene that Heisuke walked, having previously been doing laundry. He appeared in the doorway, a confused expression on his face. He stood there with one hand in front of him, the strap of a green, lacey brassier pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"Um, Jade?" he asked his female friend, who had taught him how to use the washing machine earlier that week, "What is this? And what do I do with it?"

Jade looked up from her book and froze. Her cheeks suddenly went scarlet. Every eye in the room turned to the article of clothing that Heisuke held. All was silent. Then Emily burst out laughing, causing the poor boy to start. The men looked confused. Bras had not existed back in their time, and they were just as lost as their young friend as to why Jade would be embarrassed and Emily would be laughing. They had yet to encounter the clothing article as Heisuke had been the first of them to volunteer to help with the chore and the girls had done laundry up until that day.

Amber and Hajime, drawn by Emily's laughter, stepped up behind Heisuke a few moments later. Amber's dark eyes quickly assessed the situation. She looked at the bra in Heisuke's hand and then sighed softly.

"That, Heisuke, is commonly known as a bra. It is what women use to contain and support their breasts," she said bluntly, "The bra you are currently holding belongs to Jade."

_Heisuke's face immediately turned the color of a cherry. Shinipachi joined Emily with his own uproarious laughter as the young woman's own was redoubled in response to Amber's explanation. Hajime's eyes widened slightly before he looked away, clearing his throat. Sano

closed his eyes and sighed. Souji's green eyes were wide as he stared at the bra, apparently unable to come to terms with the fact that he was viewing a piece of clothing that his girlfriend wore to cover one of her most intimate body parts. A light blush covered his cheeks. He glanced to Jade, who looked as if she might die of embarrassment._

Jade stood quickly, setting the book down as she did so. Moving fast, she grabbed the bra from Heisuke and darted past him with a muttered 'thank you'. Amber and Hajime let her through and she ran quickly up the stairs to her room. There was a moment in which the only sounds were Shinipachi and Emily attempting to calm themselves. Then Souji sheathed his sword and ran after Jade, shoving Heisuke out of the way.

Shinipachi placed a large hand on Emily's shoulder, startling her out of her reverie.

"You awake?" he asked.

She nodded, her light ponytail shifting with the movement. She had taken the time to get ready before emerging from her room. She wore a pair of tan cargo pants and a white t-shirt that read 'You're Looking at the Definition of Awesome'. Her bangs were swept over one blue eye, which glittered in the morning light that shone through the outside windows.

"Is there a reason you're running around half naked?" she asked, cocking a brow.

"Do I need a reason?" Shinipachi smirked and removed his hand in order to flex one large arm.

Emily rolled her eyes and pushed past him, having seen that there was a light on in the kitchen behind him.

"Go put a shirt on before you poke someone's eye out."

The big man laughed.

"You think I'm sexy!" he called after her.

"Whatever," she waved over her shoulder without looking at him, silently cursing whoever had taught him that term.

Shinipachi laughed again before making his way to the laundry room, presumably to get himself a shirt.

Emily walked into the kitchen to find Sano standing in front of the window, a steaming mug of tea in one hand. His gold eyes were fixed on something outside, distant and slightly glazed. Emily rose onto the balls of her feet and silently began to creep up behind him, hoping to startle him. She was only a foot away, her arms slightly raised so that she could throw them around him, when he looked over his shoulder, smiling.

"What are you doing?" he asked in an amused tone.

She sighed and, despite being foiled, hugged him anyways.

"I was trying to sneak up on you."

Sano chuckled.

"Sorry. Too many years of fighting for that to work."

She smiled, pressing her cheek against his broad back. She felt his free hand cover hers, the rough calluses on his fingers tugging lightly at her skin. Breathing in, Emily took in his scent. She could not identify its individual components, but it was warm and masculine and, more importantly, it was _Sanosuke_.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked softly, noticing that he had gone back to staring out the window.

He paused for a moment before answering, speaking slowly and choosing his words carefully.

"Shinipachi and I went scouting yesterday."

Emily knew this. However, the previous day, when she had asked him how the mission went, he had only said that he would tell her later. She listened carefully as he continued.

"We checked out the places where you, Amber, and Jade used to work. We started at the library, since it's the closest. When we got there, we found some strange men hanging around outside," his tone changed slightly, becoming colder, "Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between an Oni and a normal human when the Oni are in disguise, but these men..." he shook his head, "It was like they wanted us to know. We would have had a harder time identifying them if they had remained completely human in appearance. But they blatantly showed us their yellow eyes. The same thing happened at the restaurant and the store. They were on your trail and they made no effort to hide it."

Emily's arms tightened around him as she thought of those inhuman creatures walking among her former coworkers and customers, able to take the life of any one of them without a second thought. Able to take her life should she dare attempt to go out in the open without protection. She shuddered, a cold bolt of fear racing down her spine.

Sano set down the warm mug down on the counter with a soft click. Then he slowly turned, disengaging Emily's arms only to pull her into his own.

"Don't worry. They won't lay a hand on you. I promise."

She hugged him tightly.

"I know. You'll protect me."

He smiled, kissing the top of her head. His large hand rubbed a circle over her back. She sighed softly as his warmth engulfed her, shielding her from the morning chill. There was a pause. Then Emily spoke again, softly.

"Sano?"

"Hm?" his voice rumbled in her ear where she had her head laid on his chest.

"What's going to happen to us? Once everything's settled down, I mean."

His hand paused in its path over her back. She waited tensely, wondering if she had somehow said the wrong thing.

"I suppose," he began thoughtfully, "That I'll speak to your adoptive father about a possible engagement."

Emily felt her heart still. She had often thought about the reinstatement of their engagement, which had been ended by Emiko's transportation and Sanosuke's death. She had not, however, expected him to be so calmly blunt about it. Though, she thought wryly, she should have known better.

"Unless, you would rather I didn't," he said in an amused tone when she did not reply.

"No! No, I do," she said hurriedly, looking up at him, "Want you to speak to him, that is."

He smiled.

"Good. Then, I promise you, as soon as you're safe, I'll formally court you. Alright?"

Emily felt a grin overtake her lips. She stretched up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

"Alright."

* * *

><p>Jade awoke with a yawn, stretching underneath her white blanket. Her stretching was cut off when it incited a throbbing within the muscles of her arms and shoulders. She groaned, allowing her head to fall heavily onto the pillow. She had forgotten about the impromptu sword training that had begun three days earlier. Souji had decided that it was in Jade's best interest to learn the way of the katana. He had left no room for argument when he had forcefully dragged her from her bed at six in the morning three days prior. Jade, of course, had struggled and fought with him the entire way. Unfortunately, Souji was much stronger than she. While he was not so much bigger than her that he could throw her over his shoulder and carry her off, like Sano did to Emily, he could still wrap an arm around her waist and bodily force her from the house with him. Those who were awake at the time found the scene hilarious. Even Hajime had cracked a small smile as Souji walked past, his progress slowed by Jade's struggling.<p>

For hours he had trained her, letting her stop only for short rests and meals. At one point, Hajime had looked at Amber curiously, as if considering following Souji's example. She had returned his look with one of her own that spoke volumes about her distaste for the idea. Sano had offered Emily a choice, asking if she would like to be taught. She had smiled and replied that her father had taught her how to shoot when she was old enough to go hunting with him, and that she

possessed both the long barreled gun she had used for hunting and the smaller hand gun he had given her for his own peace of mind. Though Sano still held the dislike for guns that came with his being a samurai, he had been appeased by her answer.

Jade glanced at her clock. It was almost eight am. Frowning, she rose, her muscles protesting. She padded across the carpet to the door. Opening it slightly, she stuck her head out. No one else was visible on the second floor. She could vaguely hear the shower running, but there were no other sounds of life.

She crept out of the room, shutting the door, and slipped down the stairs. She saw a light in the kitchen and entered it, stopping when she came upon the scene of Sano and Emily standing with their arms around each other. Emily's cheek was pressed against his chest, her eyes closed, a small smile on her lips. Sano's large hand stroked gently up and down her spine. He wore much the same expression as the woman in his arms. It was apparent that, to them, they were the only two who existed at that moment.

Jade backtracked quickly. Souji was obviously not in the kitchen.

A large hand clapped down on her shoulder, causing her to jolt in surprise. She looked back to see Shinipachi grinning at her.

"Looking for Souji?" he asked in a low voice.

She nodded.

"He might be in bed. He had a rough night."

Jade frowned, immediately concerned.

"A rough night?"

Shinipachi's expression became serious.

"His rasetsu powers are reawakening. It's happening to Hijikata too, from what Kondou-san said over the phone yesterday. Hasn't happened to Heisuke yet, but it's only a matter of time," he sighed, "We'd hoped that maybe that part of that bastard Kazama's curse wouldn't happen, but we weren't so lucky."

He removed his hand from Jade's shoulder and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Be careful. Souji really cares for you, but, when he's in his rasetsu form, he craves blood like nothing else. I don't think he'd ever intentionally harm you, but be on guard."

With that, Shinipachi walked to the door that led to the basement and disappeared down the stairs.

Jade looked to Souji's door, memories from her time as Jun resurfacing at the mention of Souji as a rasetsu.

_Jun stood just outside her father's shop, staring up at the moon. She had been sleepless that night, unable to do much else aside from toss and turn restlessly. She clutched a thin blanket about her

shoulders, her long hair loosed down her back. Her thoughts turned to a certain Shinsengumi captain and she smiled._

"Souji..."

A shout from down the street caused her to start. She looked, wide-eyed, in the direction of the noise. It was followed by the clash of metal on metal and cries of pain and anger. The sounds of battle.

Jun was about to hurry back inside when she heard a voice she knew well.

"Come on, then!"

She froze.

Souji._

Against her will, her feet began to move, toward the sounds of fighting, toward him. She did not know why she so desperately wanted to see him again. After all, he was sarcastic, rude, and imposing, but something within her overrode those arguments against him. When he wanted to be he was funny, kind, and friendly.

I love him..._she realized._

She slowed her fast pace as she drew nearer. She could tell that there were fewer combatants now. The clashes of swords were fewer and further between. There was the sound of a blade piercing flesh and a shuddered. Then there was a fierce cry that was suddenly cut off.

Silence prevailed.

Jade felt her heart beating fast. There was no doubt in her mind that Souji had won, and was safe. Now, however, she was afraid to face the gruesome scene around the corner. She was about to turn and return home when he spoke, his voice pleasant.

"I know you're there. Come out where I can see you."

She froze. There was a pause.

"Or should I come get you?"

Frightened by the threatening undertone, she stepped out into view.

What she saw made her heart stop.

Souji stood surrounded by bodies lying in pools of blood. His uniform and sword were splattered with gore. This, however, was not what had shocked Jun, as frightening as it was. Souji's beautiful eyes were now crimson instead of their normal, vivid green. His hair, hanging about his face, was as white as freshly fallen snow, save for where the red blood of his fallen enemies stained it in sharp relief. His crimson eyes widened when she stepped into the light of the moon. She was obviously one of the last people he expected to see.

"Junâ€¦!"

_A thought flashed through her mind at the impropriety of his usage of her name without an honorific, mixing confusingly with her attempt at reconciling the image before her with that of the man she had fallen in love with. These, however, were quickly quelled when his eyes narrowed once more in a cold, murderous glare. It was the most frightening expression she had ever seen on his face, and it was aimed at her. _

He strode toward her, paying no mind to the bodies in his wake. Jun felt the urge to run from the inhuman creature that now threatened her, however, her feet felt as though someone had nailed them to the ground. Her legs refused to follow her commands, and so, she remained in his path, paralyzed by fear.

Souji came to a halt only a few inches from her, the reek of blood and death rolling off him in waves and permeating the air around them. Jun felt her bile rise at the stench. She stared up at him, trembling and wondering if he would kill her, as he had jokingly threatened so many times before.

They watched each other for a long moment.

Then, Souji smirked. It was a horrible, dark smirk that crawled across his face in a truly unnerving fashion. Jun shivered at the sight of it.

"Not going to run, Jun-chan?" he asked in a mocking voice.

Jun hesitated. Then she shook her head.

The smirk dropped slightly, becoming a frown. There was a moment of silence between them.

"Why are you here?" he asked

Jun struggled to form words past the lump that had formed in her throat.

"Iâ€¦I heard you fighting. I w-was worried about you."

Shock briefly flickered over his face at this. It was quickly covered by another mocking smile.

"Ma, ma. Most people run in the opposite direction when the Shinsengumi get in a fight, Jun-chan. You should have as well."

Jun looked at the ground, unable to stand the cold radiating from those demonic eyes. The blood from his uniform and sword had begun to form red stains on the ground beneath him from where it dripped from his person. She felt tears prick her eyes as she realized that, no matter where she looked, she could not avoid seeing some part of this waking nightmare.

_After a moment, he raised her face once more by crooking his forefinger beneath her chin. His face was serious, almost contemplative as he observed her. _

"I'm not going to kill you, Jun-chan. At least, not tonight."

Jun felt herself relax slightly. His lips curved once more. However, this smile seemed to be directed at himself.

"But," he said, "If you ever breathe a word of what you've seen tonight," he leaned toward her, causing her to stiffen. His lips brushed over the corner of her mouth before moving to her ear, his hand dropping to grip her shoulder, "I'll make sure you never speak again."

With that, he released her and was gone, leaving her alone with the corpses of his victims.

Jade raised one trembling hand to the knob of Souji's door as the memories cleared at last. She knew that, since it was morning, his rasetsu power should be dormant. However, if he feared that he might still harm her, he would most likely attempt to drive her away with hurtful sarcasm.

Taking a deep breath to steel herself, Jade twisted the handle and opened the door.

Souji stood in the middle of the room, one arm through the sleeve of his shirt, the other still working at tugging on the clothing item. He stopped when the door opened, his green eyes wide. Jade froze in the doorway, staring at him, her cheeks turning bright red. She had not been expecting to see him out of bed, much less half naked.

The button-up shirt he was halfway through putting on had left his torso completely open to her view. She found her eyes involuntarily trailing from his neck, down the smooth expanse of his chest and stomach, to the waistband of his jeans. They darted back up to his face to find him smirking in amusement.

"Perhaps I'm wrong, but, I thought it was customary to knock before entering a room in this country."

Jade felt as though her face was on fire.

"Or were you hoping to catch me undressed?"

Jade squeaked and quickly jumped back, out of the room, closing the door tightly. She heard his laughter as she leaned back against it. A few moments later, the door opened from the other side and Souji stepped out, now fully clothed. He gave her an amused half smile.

"Don't faint, now, Jade-chan. It would be a shame if I had to carry you back to your room."

Despite her flustered state, Jade managed to smack his arm before turning to stalk off. Souji chuckled and grabbed her wrist, halting her progress. Unable to resist the temptation to fluster her further, he leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"Do your undergarments today match the color of my eyes?"

She let out an outraged noise and struggled to get away from him as

he laughed at her expense.

* * *

><p>Nemu sat across the wooden table from a withered old woman. The table itself, while rickety and dilapidated in appearance, sat in the center of a nicely decorated room. The old woman herself could have been anyone's kind, caring grandmother, Nemu mused. No one would ever be able to tell that she was an Oni from the way she looked or the appearance of her home.<p>

The women sat in chairs that were as equally rickety as the table, each with a steaming cup of tea before them. Nemu often took pleasure in visiting the old woman; a half blooded Oni with a gift for foresight. It was she who had warned Nemu of the place and time in which the girls would arrive when they finally had. Today, however, her visit was not as light as her others had been in the past. She had come to warn her friend of the impending danger brought by the syndicate.

"So," the old woman sighed, "It has begun. I had hoped that we would have another few years of preparation before he made his move."

Nemu looked down at her teacup.

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," she replied, "Even more so with the Shinsengumi's support."

The other woman took a sip of her tea.

"Yes, the time of their awakening was rather fortuitous, was it not? And how are your girl's faring with their samurai around to protect them once more?" he eyes twinkled slightly.

Nemu smiled.

"Very well. I'm glad to see them so happyâ€|even though the samurais' reappearance heralds Kaito's movements."

"Indeedâ€|"

The mention of Kaito's name cast a pall over the conversation. Nemu looked out the window to see the sun climbing in the sky, its morning rays warming the autumn chilled earth below.

"You must be careful, Miakage-san," the old Oni said softly, "You know very well what it is your brother seeks now. He has waited long enough, too long, as I'm sure he believes."

Nemu felt her stomach twist in disgust. Her informants had warned her of Kaito's desire for an heir. She and Chizuru were the only pureblooded females, to her knowledge, and, since Chizuru was well protected, Nemu was the most likely target.

I would rather die, she thought darkly, _than bear any inbred abomination of his._

It was not uncommon for Oni families to inbreed in order to keep their lines pure. However, having spent time among the humans, Nemu found the concept to be utterly disgusting.

The old woman once again raised the tea cup to her lips, then, suddenly, she stiffened. Nemu felt her blood run cold. This particular Oni, while not a pureblood, possessed the gift of sensing danger before it came. She suddenly rose, setting the cup down hard enough that the tea sloshed out onto the white cloth that covered the rickety table.

"Miakage-san! You must hide yourself!"

The front door burst open, causing Nemu to jump out of her seat and turn to look into the foyer from the dining room.

She had known that, as a specific target of the syndicate, it was dangerous for her to venture out alone. Especially when her brother's spies were so close. However, she had never expected them to be so bold as to attack her outright in the apparent safety of a home.

Ten men spilled through the doorway, moving to cut off any escape routes. Nemu stood stoically, watching them with narrowed eyes. Even though each of them had much more human blood than Oni, she knew that she would be hard pressed to fight them alone. The old woman behind her, while tough, was no fighter, and would be of no help in a battle.

After the initial commotion had passed, another figure stepped into the house, walking at a leisurely pace, as if he had nothing better to do.

"Tsk, tsk, going out alone, Nemu? You should know better than that."

The man that entered the room was an Oni with long, white hair. He did not bother to hide his true appearance. Though, even if he had, Nemu would have known him.

"Merik. It's been a long time."

Merik grinned, the expression fitting well on his handsome face. It was not a mocking smile; rather, it was a very friendly one.

"Too long, princess. You should have written."

"And alert my brother to my location?"

"Ah," he chuckled, "TouchÃ©."

There was a pause.

"Why are you here, Merik?"

The man's smile dropped and he sighed. Then, he looked at Nemu seriously.

"I didn't want to be the one to do this, Nemu. But I can't disobey your brother, you know that."

Nemu stiffened. Merik had been a childhood friend as she was growing up in the Miakage household. He had been much more of an older brother than Kaito. However, he had sworn an oath to serve the head

of the Miakage clan, whoever it may be. Despite their past friendship, and any goodwill he may have toward Nemu, he was compelled to follow any orders he was given.

"So," she said softly, "You're here to take me back."

Merik nodded sadly.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "I wish I didn't have to," he stepped toward her, his expression pleading, "Please, don't fight us, Nemu. This is hard enough without having to hurt you."

Nemu closed her eyes briefly. Merik too was a pureblood, and older than she. This almost caused her to agree with him.

The girlsâ€¦!

They needed her to protect them. She took a deep breath as determination filled her. Then, she looked up at the taller man. The expression in her eyes caused his face to fall, an agonized emotion flickering through his own golden orbs.

"Very well," he said.

Nemu shifted slightly, raising her hand in preparation to fight.

"I've gotten stronger, Nemu, much stronger. You can't beat me," he said seriously.

"I've got to try. I'm sure you understand, Merik."

Merik nodded. Then he smiled wryly.

"Just like when I used to train with you."

Nemu looked at him, her face void of emotion.

"No, too much has changed for us to ever be as carefree as we were then."

He sighed.

"I guess you're right," his eyes suddenly hardened, "Get ready."

Nemu braced herself, knowing that she was only postponing the inevitable, but unwilling to go down without a fight. Her dark eyes narrowed.

Forgive me, girls. But I'll be home a little later than I thought.

13. The Plan

Here it is! The long awaited next chapter. I had a lot of fun writing this one, as the plot is taking off spectacularly. I also think that you Saito fans will love this chapter.

****With that said, I have a question for you, my dear readers: should I raise the rating on a few of the later chapters and include some lemon? I could also keep the rating where it is and do very non-graphic scenes, but, I can't decide, so, I'd like your input!****

****Warning: This scene contains some profanity on Emily's part.****

****Read and Review!****

*** * ***

><p>Emily was in the process of cooking lunch, stirring the pot that simmered on the stove. She heard Souji and Jade out in the yard as he continued to train the young woman in the art of the sword. Unfortunately for the younger girl, just because Souji's rasetsu side had kept him up the previous night, did not mean he was unable to once again force training upon her. Emily peeked out the window to see him standing to the side as Jade made her way through a form. She had, apparently, done one of the stances incorrectly, because Souji lazily smacked her foremost leg with his sheathed katana, causing Jade to wince and shoot him a glare.<p>

Emily sniggered, returning to her cooking. Personally, she thought that Jade and Souji made a rather cute couple. She found their interactions both humorous and sweet. There were times, like this instance, where Souji infuriated his girlfriend. There were others, however, when she would stare into his green eyes with the most content expression Emily had ever seen. The way he looked at her was equally loving. The sarcastic coldness would drain from his expression and he would smile softly at her, occasionally murmuring to her in Japanese.

Hajime and Amber usually displayed an, in Emily's eyes, almost sickening tenderness. Most of the time, the quiet couple could be found in the sitting room, holding hands and talking quietly of their previous life together. Amber seemed to be the only one who could get Hajime to truly smile, and, when he did, her returning smile would light up the room. They were truly happy together and their love was a beautiful thing.

Then, there was Sano. Emily found herself grinning foolishly. He had proposed. Well, he had at least stated his intention of courting her and then, eventually, marrying her. She gave a dreamy sigh at the memory of what he had said that morning, picturing him standing at the end of the aisle in a suit. Her cheeks flared and she quickly focused on the pot of soup again, muttering under her breath.

You're acting just as bad as the other two! she scolded herself, _If not worse!_

Still, she had never imagined herself married. Most certainly not to a man like Sano. He was, she allowed herself the thought, perfect.

The phone abruptly rang. Emily hastily turned down the heat on the stove and placed a lid on top of the pot, setting the soup to a simmer. She then picked up the phone, and answered it, seeing that

the caller ID displayed Nemu's number.

* * *

><p>Amber's grey eyes studied the playlist of her ipod as she shuffled through it, searching for the correct song. She was alone in her room, as Hajime was downstairs using the phone to communicate with Hijikata. She found her lips curving softly at the mere thought of him. Hajime had, in just a few days, become one of the main focal points of her life. She had, in her previous life, loved him unconditionally. It seemed that, in this life, she was well on her way to doing so again. She found it almost painful not to be in his presence, his absence so acute that it made her heart clench. They had found each other again, after over a century, and she hated to think of what might happen if they were ever separated again. However, she could hear the gentle murmur of his voice from downstairs, and that granted her some comfort.<p>

She stood before her nightstand, her ipod held in one hand, the first fingertip of the other hand gingerly moving over the touch-sensitive screen. After a moment, she paused, her finger hovering over a song title. Her small smile grew as she considered the irony of the song. With a small laugh, she gently pressed down before placing the ipod in the dock on her nightstand. A few seconds later, music filled the air.

Heart beats fast

Colors and promises

How to be brave?

How can I love when I'm afraid to fall?

Amber closed her eyes and stepped back to a more open part of the room, swaying slightly with the music. Hajime, his mere presence, did indeed make her heart begin to beat faster. His sweet promises as he whispered them in her ear caused her cheeks to flush pink.

"I will never leave you," he had said, _"I will love you forever, even if the time comes that you do not want me."_

But Amber knew that the day he spoke of would never come. How could she not love and want him?

But watching you stand alone,

All of my doubt suddenly goes away somehow.

A pair of hands suddenly settled on her hips. Amber's eyes opened to meet Hajime's deep blue ones. He gently pulled her closer, his lips turned up in a gentle smile.

One step closer.

Amber's arms slipped around his neck as they swayed together, slowly, gently to the unhurried beat of the song. She had not heard him come back upstairs, but now that he was here, she felt lighter, happier. He was, she concluded, like the flame that she, the moth, was unerringly drawn to. And vice versa. When duty and expectations did

not call, they were together, their separate names linked to become one phrase, Hajime and Amber, Amber and Hajime. To break the link and utter one name without the other would become strange and foreign.

Gradually, Amber felt herself pressing even closer, allowing her head to fall against his shoulder. She savored the close contact. She had felt very shy for the past week. At this moment, however, it seemed that there was no one else in the world but the two of them. There was nothing to be shy about. He loved her. She was secure in his arms as they danced together, oblivious to the world around them. His warmth wrapped around her like a blanket, causing her eyes to drift shut. She inhaled his scent, her face nestled into the curve of his neck where it met his shoulder.

His arms tightened around her, as though she may slip away at any moment. Amber smiled slightly. Hajime had confessed to her that he was a rather selfish man. At first, she had been confused as to how someone as gentle and kind could be described as selfish. He had explained that he was selfish because he would never again let her go, even at the cost of mortal injury. Amber had stared at him, not expecting such a sincere promise of love, however, she supposed that she should have expected it from a samurai.

The song began to slow, and so did they, their movements becoming less and less pronounced until they came to a halt. As the last lines played, Amber felt Hajime pull back ever so slightly and lifted her head, her eyes opening to look up at him.

Hajime's face was as smooth and calm as ever. His eyes, however, were intense, and as nervous as Amber had ever seen them. While she knew that he was capable of such intensity, she was surprised. Hajime was, if nothing else, smoothly confident. She did not understand why he, of all people, would display nervousness.

One of his hands, which had previously rested against her lower back, slid up to the base of her skull, his long fingers gently cradling her head. Amber's eyes widened slightly in confusion.

"Hajime?" she murmured softly.

The next song had begun to play, but neither of them was paying attention. They were too wrapped up in each other, in the intensity of this moment. Amber realized what his intentions were when he hesitantly leaned in, his face drawing nearer to hers. For a brief instant, her heart stopped. When it started again, it beat at twice its previous pace, her blood rushing through her veins. It seemed that Hajime desired to kiss her, however, he was just as inexperienced and nervous as she. From what the other men had told her, he was one of the few who abstained from the female pleasures of the Shimabara, as he had never felt the need to engage in them. This, of course, meant that he had little personal experience in physical affection and intimacy.

He paused in his advance, searching her eyes for anything that may signify that she did not wish for him to continue. This, Amber realized, was the cause of his anxiety. He was afraid of rejection. She found the thought somewhat ridiculous. She could not fathom why she would ever reject this man.

She tilted her chin up, subtly inviting him, reassuring him that she desired the same thing. The samurai picked up on her invitation. His arm around her waist tightened, pulling her impossibly closer as he pressed his lips to hers.

>Books, Amber concluded, simply did not do justice to the profound magic of a first kiss between lovers. In that single kiss was expressed all the emotion and love that words could not. His soft lips were gently and tentatively coaxing her own to follow in his movements, to return and deepen the kiss. Amber obliged, the initial shock of having been kissed in the first place wearing off. Her own hands moved, almost of their own accord, one of them slipping into his soft, dark hair. The other clutched at the back of his shirt, as she was beginning to feel rather unsteady. Though his kiss was, like him, gentle and soft, it was also infused with a passion that made her tremble slightly and caused her knees to weaken.<p>

One moment and then another and another passed, and yet they did not pull away for more than the briefest of pauses in order to regain their breaths. They had both discovered why the kiss was so glorified within literature and artwork. It seemed that they could not be satiated with the first simple kiss, for so many more had followed in such a short time. It was one of the most beautiful moments of Amber's life. To share in this physical display of love with Hajime made her feel slightly giddy.

Hajime's lips parted from hers slowly, almost reluctantly. His forehead rested against hers as the two of them breathed a little more quickly than normal.

"Amber," his deep voice and loving tone caused her cheeks to flush a bit darker than they had previously during their kiss.

She peeked up at him, her grey eyes meeting his dark blue. A small smile crept over her face, one that he returned. His long fingers trailed over her cheek.

"Hajime, I-"

Whatever Amber had been about to say was cut off by a scream from the kitchen.

"You dickless son of a bitch! Bastard!"

Amber froze, Emily's scream turning her blood cold. Though the older woman had been known to curse occasionally, such a stream of profanity from her lips was indeed a shock.

Both Hajime and Amber raced out the door and down the stairs. Amber made it to the kitchen first, her worry for her friend pushing her faster. She skidded slightly as she entered the room, her socks lacking the traction for a proper stop. At first, Amber had been afraid that Emily's temper had caused her to go off on one of the men, which, in hindsight, was unfathomable. Now, however, she saw that the older woman was yelling into the phone, which she clutched in a death grip.

"I swear to _God_, if you hurt her I will tear you_ limb from limb_!"

Sano burst into the kitchen, looking ready to fight off whoever had

incited Emily's wrath. Upon seeing her standing in the middle of the room, her entire body tense with rage, he made his way to her and laid a calming hand on her shoulder. Emily's blue eyes were wide, her pupils dilated, and her teeth clenched as she listened to the reply from the other end of the line.

"Like hell I would believe you! Here's my promise, Merik Keikyoku, I'm going to find you, and then, I'm going to kill you."

There was a moment of silence after that. Jade and Souji had also come to see what the commotion was about, followed by Heisuke and Shinipachi, who both had been in the basement. No one dared to move as whoever Emily was conversing with spoke with words that only she could hear. The silence ended when she removed the phone from her ear, pushing the button to end the call. She gripped it so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Then, tears began to run from her eyes, which still burned in fury.

"They have Nemu."

Murmured curses and exclamations filled the kitchen. Jade made a small anguished cry, causing Souji to grab her arm and quickly pull her into an embrace. Amber felt Hajime grip her hand tightly. Sano moved so that his arm was wrapped protectively about Emily.

The light haired woman threw the phone onto the counter top, where it skidded until it hit the wall. She held one clenched hand to her forehead, trembling with rage and grief.

"I answered because it was her cell number that came up on the caller ID. But it wasn't her," she seemed to crumple in on herself as she spoke, her voice becoming more choked, "It was an Oni by the name of Merik Keikyoku. Nemu went to visit Mrs. Hidston this morning...and that's where they took her," she sniffed, "He said that, if it was any consolation, she put up a good fight. She killed six of his men before they managed to drag her down. He said that this was a courtesy call," her tone became hard again, "And that, they'll make their move soon."

Jade's lower lip trembled at the news. Souji's green eyes narrowed and he hugged her tighter. Sano's face had hardened, as had Shinipachi's and Heisuke's. Hajime's expression was as calm as ever. There was an unspoken agreement among the men that they would be damned before they allowed a hand to be laid on the girls.
>Amber, still clutching Hajime's hand, spoke up.<p>

"On the phone, you said that he had made a promise. What was it?"

Emily looked up at her.

"He promised no harm would come to her."

Emily's hand slid up to cover Sano's where it still rested on her shoulder. Jade, pressed into Souji's chest by his tight grip, closed her eyes, steeling herself. Amber turned to look at Hajime, a mask of necessity sliding into place on her face.

Despite the need to grieve that each of the girls felt, they knew that grieving would do nothing to help themselves or Nemu. Action had

to be taken now.

"This should be reported in person," she said seriously, "If their attack is coming soon, it's possible that the phone line may become an unsafe means of communication. And," she looked down, "This is a big deal."

Hajime nodded.

"I agree," he looked at the others, "Amber and I will report this to Kondou-san."

Emily spoke again.

"We'll need to check out Mrs. Hidston's house. I don't know if she's even still alive, but, if she is, she might have information for us."

"It may be unwise for us to split up like this," Amber cautioned.

Hajime squeezed her hand.

"Don't doubt our skills, Amber. Besides, Emily has a good point. The scene of the abduction will need to be investigated."

Shinpachi gave a smile to lighten the mood, moving to stand so that Emily was sandwiched between him and Sano.

>"Yeah, don't worry, she'll have Sano and I with her."<p>

Heisuke frowned, not willing to be left behind.

"What about me?"

Jade abruptly spoke.

"I'll need you here."

Everyone turned to look at her questioningly. She did not move from within the protective circle of Souji's arms, but her voice was firm.

"Nemu left a contingency plan, which will need to be set into motion. She suspected that they may take her in order to demoralize us. We...discussed the possibility."

Jade had been the first one to forgive Nemu, as they had been closest. While each of the girls had made their peace with her, it made sense that, for time's sake, it was Jade who had been told of this plan.

She cleared her throat and continued.

"I'm going to need help searching her apartment and possibly going through some files," upon seeing Heisuke's dubious look, she pressed forward, "It's not the most exciting job, I know. But it is necessary. All of her financial contacts and informants are listed in code. She gave me the code key, but it still needs sorted."

The boy looked at her for a moment and then nodded. Souji, feeling

the need to cheer Jade up, poked her in the side, causing her to twitch.

"What, you don't think I'm capable enough to help you?"

Jade caught his hand before he could poke her again and looked up at him.

"Many hands make light work," she leaned in to whisper in his ear, "And I'm not sure I trust you to be alone with me."

He managed to look affronted, though his eyes sparkled mischievously.

"You may be right," he murmured back, "I may not be able to control myself in the face of such beauty," he grinned, "But you would enjoy it."

Jade went bright red.

Emily threw up her hands, as though withdrawing from the situation.

"Nope, I am not sticking around while they debate on getting a room."

She marched over to the stove and turned it off, the soup already ruined due to having been forgotten during the phone call and following discussion. Then she took Sano's hand and practically pulled him from the room.

"Come on, this crime scene isn't going to investigate itself."

The golden eyed man smiled in response to her rush to get away from the other couple. While it was obvious that she was forcing herself to act normally, he was glad that she had not fallen prey to grief.

Shinpachi followed, grinning.

"Try not to get into trouble, Heisuke. I won't be here to get you out."

Heisuke scoffed.

"That's my line!" he called after the big man.

Amber and Hajime had already vacated the kitchen and were preparing to leave. Amber shrugged on a jacket and purse, taking her car keys from her pocket. Hajime wore only a cardigan over his tight black shirt, despite the fact that the weather had turned chilly.

Jade escaped Souji's grasp and moved to the kitchen doorway, looking into the foyer.

"Be safe," she called.

Amber nodded in return.

Emily grinned.

"Pfft, I'm always safe."

With that, the trio of friends split up.

14. The Attic

I apologize for the wait. My computer is being a pain in the butt and decided that it doesn't like to turn on any more. So, I sent it to the shop and it took the next chapter with it. I managed to borrow mom's computer for long enough to rewrite it. *Sighs*

On the bright side, I am now playing through _Hakuouki Demon of the Fleeting Blossom_. The first time, I just played as I would play, selecting random choices based on what I personally would do. I ended up with Saito (which was kinda surprising) but we both died in the end. He was stabbed by Kazama and I was punched by Amagiri...screw you too, Kazama. Then I decided to find a blog and actually play through using a guide. I've completed Souji and Sano's routes. Oh my gosh, Souji is so romantic when he's not running around spouting stuff about killing everyone. And Sano...oh Sano...be still my beating heart. I nearly died during Sano's route of a fangirl heart attack. I'm currently working on Hijikata's...yeahhhh...Hiji's is kinda lame...he's pretty but I'm just kinda like '...okay then...'. Next, I'll be playing through Hajime's route as I have finally gotten over the scarring of watching him die.

I have decided that instead of including lemon chapters within this story, I'll do separate one-shots. That way, those who don't want to read the lemons can continue on their merry way and those who do will only have to go to my account to access them. I'll let you guys know when they'll be posted. I want to post them in chronological order with the story, so that we don't have spoilers ^^. This, however, will not stop me from having some fairly steamy scenes included here. The way I see it, T= PG-13, so I can have some limes chunked into this story plot.

If this chapter seems mushy, it's because of the game, I swear. It makes my heart go doki-doki. XD.

**WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS SOME SEXUAL THEMES (don't worry, it's just a bordering lime)**

* * *

><p>Jade coughed lightly as dust billowed into her face from within the box. She waved a hand, trying to clear the air. She heard a loud sneeze from the other side of the room as Heisuke was assaulted in much the same way. The light that shone from the bulb on the ceiling was clouded by the thick billows of dust that swirled through the air, dimming the crowded room and irritating the sinuses of those within. Jade thought fleetingly about how fortunate it was that Souji was no longer sick, else he would never have been able to enter the room. As it was, he was having difficulty with being so active during the day due to the reawakening of his inner demon.<p>

"Maa," Heisuke complained, "I don't think these are the right boxes, Jade-chan. They're so dusty."

Jade nodded in agreement, unable to answer as another bout of coughing struck her.

"I think you're right. Anything Nemu left for us would be more recent."

Souji lifted a thin, cloth bound book from within another box. He flipped it open to a random page, his long fingers nimbly dipping down to brush the top corner of the yellowed paper.

"This book is nearly seventy years old."

His voice was slightly more serious than usual. He looked over to Jade, his lips quirking into a small smirk.

"I think we're in the wrong room."

Jade sighed and closed the box before her.

Upon entering Nemu's attic apartment, the trio had found that it was divided into five rooms: a bedroom, a bathroom, a sitting room, which could also be called a library for all the books contained there, and two storage rooms. While Jade had been up there a few times before, she had never explored the apartment enough to truly know its layout. Nemu had, before her kidnapping, told Jade that the documents necessary for access to her contacts, large sums of money, and other resources were located within the storage room. She had not, however, specified which storage room. The front storage room, the one they were currently searching, was disorderly and full of dust as though no one had touched its contents in a very long time. The boxes had been stacked in no specific order, as though Nemu had simply thrown them carelessly into the room when she moved into the house. Precarious stacks of heavy boxes towered high over their heads, ready to tip and crash to the ground if upset.

Jade picked her way through the stacks, most of which contained Nemu's extensive collection of personal journals and keepsakes from time periods long past. As she reached the door that led to the second storage room, her brow furrowed.

The other room was much more neatly organized, and quite a bit cleaner than the front room. Jade stuck her head through the door and glanced about. The few boxes within the room lined the walls, stacked in a neat and orderly manner. What held the most interest for Jade, however, was the Japanese dōcor within the room. The floor was covered in tatami mats. In the center sat a low, wooden table. Rice paper sliding doors lined the walls that were not covered by boxes.

Jade stepped into the room, frowning lightly. There was an air of solemnity and historical significance within the room. She felt that something important lay within, however, she did not know what. She was that even the clashing of swords would not break the thick silence in the room. Once inside, she felt as though she was within some sort of sanctum, a place where the outside world faded away. Cautiously, she proceeded further into the room, moving to the closet door that lay in the furthest wall. Her fingers curled around the edge of the door and she slowly pulled it open.

"Jade-chan!"

The quite intensity of the moment was broken by Heisuke's voice.

"I'm going downstairs. I just got a text from Emily that Sano wants me to call him!"

Jade smiled slightly. While the men of the Shinsengumi had learned how to use their cell phones to an extent, only Souji and Heisuke seemed to grasp the concept of texting. Amber had attempted to teach Hajime, however, it seemed that no matter how he explained it, the swordsman could not work past his confusion of its workings. Finally, she had given up, sighing and taking his hand in hers.

"It's alright. It's not really a necessary skill," she told him.

Sano simply had not seen the point. In his mind, as long as he knew how to make and receive calls on a cell phone, why would he need to text? Shinipachi agreed with his friend, though Heisuke had not. The younger man had quickly picked up on the skill, as well as that of using the camera in his phone, and had taken to practicing by taking shots of himself and the others before texting them to the girls, usually including amusing commentary in the message. Souji too seemed to find great enjoyment in taking pictures, mostly of Jade. Emily had teased them to no end when she found out that she and Souji each had set their screen background to a picture of the other. The couple, however, had been fairly unresponsive, as they had no shame in their actions.

"Alright," Jade responded, her voice seeming unnaturally loud in the quiet room.

She heard the patter of footsteps, followed by a crash and a few curses, before Heisuke finally made it to the stairs. His departure was marked by the creaking of the stairwell door, followed by a sound much like the stampeding of elephants as he ran down the stairs. It was nearly impossible to get good service in the attic.

A few moments later, Souji appeared in the doorway between the two storage rooms, grinning.

"He knocked an entire stack over on himself," he said, obviously finding amusement in this.

Jade smiled and shook her head. She then turned back to the open closet. It was full of clothing contained within garment bags. This was obviously not where they would find the files they were searching for. She was about to shut the door again when a flash of color caught her eye. Frowning, she moved the other clothes aside, pushing them so that they slid along the metal bar on their hooks. She let out a small gasp as the colorful item was fully revealed.

She reached out, placing a hand on the kimono that hung before her. It was a beautiful rich orange, patterned with flowers of numerous springtime colors.

"I'm a walking dead man, Jun-chan," he murmured, dropping his arrogant air for once and letting her see a glimpse of what was deep within.

_ "Then let me love you until you leave this earth, Souji-kun," she whispered against the fabric of his western clothing.
>

_ He pulled back just far enough to look down at her.
>

_ "Are you sure? I could die at any time, you know." _

_ Her heart sped as she took notice of the proximity of his face to hers. A breeze moved through the garden where they stood, rustling the trees and flowers. Jun's orange kimono and yellow obi rustled as well, the bow at her back bending with the movement of the wind.
_

_ Souji's fingers moved gently over her cheek in a gesture of tenderness that Jun had never felt before. His lips curved softly._

_ "Baka," he let his forehead fall so that it rested against hers, "Getting stuck with a guy like me." _

_ Jun smiled in return._

_ "I wouldn't have it any other way, Souji-kun." _

"This was mine," Jade murmured as brief flashback faded from her mind.

Souji came up behind her, drawn by her gasp. He looked over her shoulder, his lips quirking in a smile.

"That was the one you were wearing when you told me you loved me," he said, his tone only slightly teasing.

Jade looked back at him, smiling softly in return, her heart still as full of love for him as it had been the day of her confession, so many years ago.

"I still love you, Souji."

Souji's arm wrapped about her waist as he turned her away from the closet and towards him. She felt the hard lines of his body as he pulled her closer, and found herself thinking of the toned physique she had seen only that morning.

"That's good. If you didn't, I wouldn't be able to say that I love you too."

Jade laughed softly, brushing his bangs out of his eyes with a gentle touch. His brown hair slid through her fingers in silky locks, making her want nothing more than to run her hands through it.

"Who knew that you were such a hopeless romantic underneath that samurai exterior?"

He seemed to find this quite amusing, judging from the expression that overtook his face.

"A hopeless romantic? What's wrong with telling my woman that I love her."

The kimono that had sparked the moment hung, forgotten, in the closet behind Jade as she grinned playfully.

"Who says I'm your woman?" she teased.

His smirk was almost catlike as his grip on her tightened, his fingers pressing into her skin despite the barrier of clothes.

"I do. And I'll kill anyone who says otherwise," he leaned a bit closer, his breath fanning across her lips as the mood abruptly became more serious, "I won't let anyone take you away from me again, Jade-chan," he stared into her eyes seriously, "You are mine," he smiled slightly, "And I am yours. Forever."

With that, he closed the small amount of distance between them and pressed his lips to hers. Jade made a small noise of surprise. While she had thought he might kiss her, she had not really expected him to. Now however, with his soft lips moving over hers in such a sensual manner, she found her process of thought come to a screeching halt. She did not think or reason, she merely felt. His hands held her close, as though she may slip away at any moment. His kiss was soft, but infused with a desperation, as if he were afraid that he would never again have this chance. After a moment, she found herself responding, attempting to match his movements with her own. She slipped her arms around him, bringing one hand up to slide her fingers into his soft hair, as she had desired to do only a few minutes earlier.

He pulled back briefly, his lips barely separating from hers.

"I love you, Jade."

"Souji..." his name was a breathless whisper.

He kissed her again, more fiercely this time, and with enough passion to cause her to take an involuntary step back despite being within the circle of his arms. Souji responded by pulling her back against him in one movement, their kiss never breaking. A moment later, his lips slid from hers, moving over her jaw and down to her neck. Jade squeaked, biting back a much different sound that threatened to leave her as he began to wreck havoc on the sensitive skin of her throat. Her arms tightened around him as her face flushed. She had known that Souji could set her heart to pounding, but never had she imagined him doing so in such a manner. He kissed her neck softly, his lips barely brushing over her skin. She gave a soft sigh at the pleasant feeling. However, when he reached the junction of her neck and shoulder, she let out a quiet moan. He paused and Jade felt him smirk against her neck.

Whatever worries she might have had were cut off as she felt him nip lightly at the same spot, driving a shudder down her spine. He chuckled, drawing his mouth back to hers. After one more gentle kiss, he pulled away, looking smug.

Jade's heart fluttered within her chest as she breathed a little faster than usual. She knew from the heat in her face that her cheeks were flushed. Souji chuckled at the state he had left her in.

"Your moan sounded even nicer than I imagined."

Jade's eyes widened in disbelief, her cheeks flaring in a blush. She pushed at him and he released her, grinning unrepentantly.

"I take it back," she muttered, glaring at him, "You're not romantic. You're a pervert!"

Souji laughed before pulled the irritated woman back into his arms and hugging her.

"Gomen. But you're so cute when you blush. I couldn't resist."

Jade slumped slightly with a defeated sigh. Of course he had only done it to get a reaction out of her.

"We're supposed to be looking for those files."

The pair once again separated in order to search. Only a few minutes later, Jade found them within one of the other closets, stowed neatly away within a small wooden box. She flipped through them quickly, ensuring that everything was there that Nemu said would be there. She nodded to herself, shutting the closet door with the sound of wood sliding over wood.

"I've got them, Souji. Let's go downstairs and wait for the others to return."

Souji nodded and took her hand, leading her from the room. He guided her through the front storage room, where, by some miracle, the towers of boxes still stood despite Heisuke's blunder. Together, they departed the attic apartment, shutting the door behind them.

As they came to the bottom of the stairs on the first level, they found Heisuke standing in the main room, his fingers moving deftly across the screen of his cell phone as he flipped through pictures. His normally cheerful expression had been replaced by a rather somber one. Wordlessly, he held the phone out to Souji, who released Jade's hand to take it.

Heisuke turned to Jade.

"They're on their way back. Sano said they found some information on the syndicate. Apparently the old lady was good at digging stuff up. Emily texted me some pictures of the crime scene," he gestured to the phone, "It's...pretty bad."

The sound of a key turning in a lock caused everyone to look toward the front door. A moment later, it swung open and Emily stepped inside, followed by Sano and Shinipachi.

"I saw a dead body," she announced, "And you are not gonna believe what we found."

15. How Emily Saw a Dead Body

****Hello!** First, I'd like to apologize for the long wait. After my laptop kicked the bucket, taking the next chapter of this story with

it, I lost my muse and pretty much gave up for a while. However, I recently got my Wisps juices flowing again and busted out this chapter today. I've got it all planned out, I just have to write it. I'm currently working on the next update. However, I am in the middle of my second semester of college, working on a project proposal for a trip to Cambodia, and looking to donate a kidney, so life is busy. I just now found the time to really write (yes, I did get my assignments done first). I hope you enjoy this chapter, I know it's rather short, but there's more to follow soon! Please forgive my lapse in writing. **

R&R!

**WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS GORE AND A DEAD BODY**

* * *

><p>A few hours earlier**

Emily stepped out of the car, Sano and Shinipachi close behind. She had parked a little further down the block than was normal, but she did not want to link her vehicle to the crime scene. Though, as they walked, she wondered if it had been the best idea, as both men had brought along their swords. Nothing like a couple of strapping men carrying swords to convince people that you had nothing to do with a crime. At least Sano had not chosen to bring his spear, which was much more conspicuous.

As they made their way up the street, Emily stayed close to Sano, unwilling to stray from his side when danger could be lurking. Together, the trio, as nonchalantly as they could, walked up the sidewalk to a single-story white house. A rocking chair sat on end of the front porch, a swing hanging from the rafters at the other end. Flowers lined the beds around the house, their petals withering as the cold weather slowly killed them, and small, ceramic garden gnomes hid among them, smiling cheerfully. Curtains hung over the windows, visible from outside, lacy and white in the glint of the sunlight. Overall, the setting was calm and peaceful. For all anyone knew, Mrs. Hidston could be inside, watching television and knitting. However, Emily knew more than just anyone. Bracing herself, she followed Sano up the three steps to the front porch.

One hand on his sword hilt, Sano tested the door handle. It fell with a clang, obviously having hurriedly been set back in place in order to deceive anyone who did not observe it more closely. Emily tensed, wishing she had brought her pistol as the door creaked open ominously. Sano glanced back at Shinipachi, who nodded, bringing up the rear. Both were completely serious, which was rare, and only affirmed the severity of the situation. At the nod, Sano pushed the door open completely and stepped inside. Emily followed, and was immediately assaulted by the overwhelming stench of blood. She immediately covered her mouth and nose with her hand, trying not to gag. Shinipachi shut the door behind them before turning to join his companions in observing the room.

The small, tiled foyer where they stood was really just part of the front sitting room. The sitting room itself was in ruins. Furniture had been smashed, the couch riddled with bullet holes, and the walls painted with blood. The red splatters, some of them containing bits of gore, gave testament to the fight that had taken place. Some of

them were obviously caused by where a bullet had passed through a body. Othersâ€¦Emily could only guess about. Shinipachi swore lowly under his breath, looking around with wide eyes. Sano's expression tightened. He glanced at Emily.

"Are you alright?"

He and Shinipachi had been in numerous battles, even a war, and had seen much worse. Indeed, they had both died in such battles. Emily however was unused to these grizzly spectacles. Though she was a bit pale, she nodded firmly. Unused to them though she was, she was strong, and would not be deterred.

"I'm fine. Let's get this done."

Sano nodded, his eyes lingering on her.

Shinpachi drew his sword, the slithering sound of blade against scabbard calling their attention to him. He nodded towards a hallway that stood directly across the sitting room from the front door.

"I'll take that part of the house," he nodded to a second doorway to their left, "You take that side."

Sano drew his own sword as a precaution, giving a single nod of agreement. Emily looked between them, in awe of the easy way they went about this task. It bespoke years of comradery and entering combat together. The two samurai, brothers in arms, exchanged one last glance before setting off, picking through the ruins of the sitting room. Emily went with Sano, following his footsteps so as not to disturb the rubble. Shinpachi disappeared down the hall as Sano and Emily entered the next room.

Emily stopped in the doorway, eyes wide. If the sitting room had been grizzly, the dining room was a nightmare. The table had been flipped upside-down, its two remaining legs sticking upright, coated with gore, as thoughâ€¦Emily felt her stomach turn, as though someone had been impaled on each of them. Her eyes trailed over the bloodstains in the carpet and on the walls. A large hole in one wall suggested that one of the other table legs had been used there, as more blood had dried as it dripped downward. It was obvious that a massacre had taken place in at least the dining room and sitting room. Sano muttered something in Japanese, observing the room in mixed shock and disgust.

Emily hesitantly stepped further into the room. It was obvious that the syndicate had taken the bodies of their own fallen soldiers, as well as Nemu. However, they had experienced heavy losses by the looks of things. Since Nemu was alive, at least, according to Merik Keikyoku, Emily drew the conclusion that this had all come from the syndicate's men. Her eyes widened as she finished that trail of thought. That meant that Nemu had been the one to do this.

"Holy shitâ€¦" she murmured.

She could not reconcile her image of Nemu, the kind, playful, friendly woman who had always been there for her, with the kind of creature who could do this. Even knowing that Nemu was an Oni, not human, did not make it any easier. Nemu was Nemu, not some kind of

monster who rampaged and impaled people on table legs.

With shaking hands, Emily pulled out her cell phone and began to take pictures. She was not sure why, but it seemed like a good idea. Sano continued on into the kitchen, on the other side of the dining room. After a moment, Emily heard him call her.

"Emily, I've found the old woman."

Emily hurriedly followed him, running into the linoleum kitchen. She came to a stop when she saw the body. Mrs. Hidston was lying on the floor, facedown. Judging by the trail of blood, she had managed to drag herself from the dining room to her current position after being injured. Emily slowly approached the corpse, crouching down beside it. Sano stood back a bit, watching her carefully.

"Did you know her well?" he asked.

Emily shrugged.

"We came over a couple of times when she invited us for tea and cookies, but, other than thatâ€¦" she trailed off, looking over the body.

Though she had not known Mrs. Hidston well, there was still something shocking about seeing someone who had, last she knew, been alive and well, lying on the ground, dead. As it did not seem right to take pictures of the old woman, she stowed her phone away.

Sano suddenly bent next to her, reaching out for the drawer next to Mrs. Hidston's head. Emily looked over, surprised. Then she saw that the dead woman's hand was stretched out oddly, the drawer ajar, as though she had been working to open it in her last moments. Carefully, Sano slid the drawer open. Contained within, was a large cookbook with numerous loose sheaves of paper tucked in between the pages. Emily frowned. That did not make sense. Why, in her last moments, of all things, would Mrs. Hidston be reaching for a cookbook?

Sano lifted the book out and opened it, brow furrowed. As soon as the first page was revealed, his eyes widened. He had seen the cookbooks at Nemu's house and knew that this was not a mere cookbook. Though he could not read it, the photographs included were clear enough. This book was a compilation of information on something, and it definitely was not recipes. Emily stood to look at the book as well.

"Are thoseâ€¦weapon stores?"

In a least three of the photographs, taped to the third page and dated in order, contained images of everything from modern guns to katanas. Sano nodded.

"I think we might need to take this."

Emily nodded in agreement.

Further inspection of the house turned up nothing of interest. Emily finished taking pictures of the scene. Then, carefully, leaving nothing else disturbed, the three investigators left. As they walked away from the house, Emily called Heisuke, telling him that she

needed him to go to an area with better service so that she could text him the photos. Then, after that was done, she climbed into the driver's seat of the car and they pulled away.

Emily glanced in the rearview mirror. Whatever had happened in that house, she never wanted to know. However, she did know one thing now. There was much more to Nemu and the Oni world than had been revealed thus far.

16. Reporting In

****Alrighty, here's another update! I worked hard on writing it fast, but college likes to get in the way. Today, I have to devote my efforts to my Cambodia proposal, so, no telling when I'll get writing time again this week. On the bright side, there's action coming...like within the next chapter. It's impossible to write a Hakuouki fic without having the guys being total badasses, so, badassery is on its way. Toshi is in this chapter. He's so beautiful~ (and so hard to write). So, Toshi fans, rejoice! Also! For those of you looking forward to Emily and Sano's lemon, it's coming soon as well, not as soon as the action, but soon.****

****And I just had to chase my cat off the toilet...she seems to think that toilet water is tasty...gross, cat.****

****R&R!****

*** * ***

><p>Amber sat on the couch next to Hajime, legs crossed one over the other. Their joined hands rested between them, their shoulders touching lightly. Kondou sat in an armchair across from them, his brows drawn together. On a loveseat, sat his second-in-command, Toshizo Hijikata, and the young Oni girl, Chizuru. Sannan, who had greeted the couple at the door, was nowhere to be found, as he had disappeared soon after their arrival.<p>

Amber and Hajime had just finished delivering the news of Nemu's capture. The sitting room was silent save for the ticking of a clock hanging on the wall across from the front window. Chizuru had been rather distressed by the news. Though she did not know Nemu well, the older Oni woman had imparted quite a bit of wisdom to her, one female to another. Her hands gently gripped Toshizo's sleeve as she stared at the rug in the center of the room, eyes sorrowful. Toshizo himself finally broke the silence.

"Kondou, what does this mean for us?"

Amber's grey eyes lingered on him. He intimidated her. His presence was commanding, even though it was obvious he was not attempting to make it so, and deadly. She had no doubt that he would cut down anyone who he deemed a threat. His eyes, a deep purple, cut over to meet hers for a brief moment, cold and sure, before moving back to his leader. She shivered. She knew that Hajime respected Toshizo, or, as he called him, Hijikata-san, but she could not help feeling off-put by him. The stories she had heard from those staying at Nemu's house had not helped. They had said he was like an Oni himself in combat, even before he had become a Rasetsu, and that Kazama, the powerful pureblood who had cursed them in the first place, was

looking for a rematch with him. They had also said that, though the battle had ultimately resulted in Toshizo's death, he had beaten Kazama in the latest of their numerous clashes. Meeting him in person, she did not doubt that the stories were true.

Kondou sighed in response to Toshizo's question.

"Mikage-san foresaw this possibility and left a contingency plan. I believe that Miss Jade was made aware of part of this plan. As for us, Miakage-san put me in contact with a number of her informants. We will still be able to keep up on the syndicate's movements, and, possibly, consider a rescue attempt."

Amber's eyebrows rose in response to this. While she had suspected that Nemu was well-informed, she was surprised to hear this allusion to a network of spies. It seemed that, though she lacked her brother's blatant political power, Nemu held quite a lot of sway in her own right.

Toshizo's eyes narrowed slightly.

"While I agree that Miakage-san's capture bodes ill, I believe that it is too early for a recovery attempt to be made. We still know too little about the syndicate itself. And we know nothing about this Merik Keikyoku, aside from that he is a loyal servant of Kaito Miakage and a fearsome warrior. But all of that is based in rumors picked up by these informants."

Before the discussion could continue, Amber's phone began to ring, signaling a call. All eyes turned to her as she removed the phone from her pocket and pressed a button, answering the call.

"Hello?"

Emily's voice answered her.

"Hey, we just got back from Mrs. Hidston's house. Are you still with Kondou-san?" she said without preamble.

Amber nodded habitually, though the action was lost on her friend.

"Yes, we're still here."

"Good, I'd like to make the report to everyone at once. Could you put your phone on speaker? I'll do the same here. "

Amber was surprised by the hard tone in Emily's voice. Obviously, whatever had been found at the house had been serious. Without hesitation, she took the phone from her ear and put it on speaker, laying it on the coffee table in the center of the room.

"It's Emily. She has the report from the scene of the kidnapping," she said in reply to the questioning looks of the others. Then, she redirected her attention to her cell phone, "Alright, Emily, you're on."

There was a brief pause where all that could be heard was the rustling of Emily finding a good surface to place her own phone on.

Then, she cleared her throat.

"Alright. Since I don't know how you all do your official reports, I'll let Sano and Shinipachi take it from here. Amber, I'm texting you the pictures of the scene. I'll warn you, they're gross."

A moment later, Amber's phone buzzed, signaling that the text had been received. She leaned forward and opened the text. Immediately upon seeing the first image, she recoiled. Hajime placed his hand on her arm questioningly. She shook her head, her face pale. She disliked blood, the sight of something that belonged inside someone being outside them did not sit well with her. She mentally cursed not having heeded Emily's warning. Frowning, Hajime took her place. His frown deepened as he observed the images, his slender forefinger gingerly running over the screen of the phone as he flipped through them. While he looked through the images, Sano's voice came through the speaker, describing what they had found. Shinipachi gave his own report, filling in some holes. Apparently, the fight had taken place only in the dining and sitting rooms. Their guess was that, after fighting through numerous opponents in the dining room, and realizing that Mrs. Hidston was beyond saving, Nemu had made her way towards the door, attempting to escape. However, she had been overpowered there, most likely by Merik Keikyoku.

Throughout the report, everyone else remained silent. Hajime wordlessly pushed the phone towards his commanding officers when he had finished. Together, they too observed the pictures taken of the crime scene. Amber could not help but catch glimpses of the photos. Table legs coated in gore, walls splattered with blood, furniture torn to pieces. As Nemu was alive, she could only assume that the blood belonged to the Oni woman's defeated opponents. Her stomach twisted frightfully. Seeing her expression, Hajime gently placed an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in close.

"Nemu did thatâ€¦" she murmured to him.

He nodded.

"Your friend is a capable fighter, it seems," his lips barely moved as he replied, "But the fact that she was defeated even after doing so much damage to the enemy suggests that Merik Keikyoku is better."

Amber closed her eyes. If her friend, sweet, kind, supportive, loving Nemu, could do that to someone, she dreaded to think of what their enemy, this Merik, a true fighter, could do.

Sano and Shinpachi's report ended with the finding of the faux cookbook. Jade had examined it and found that it was written in Nemu's code and was a compilation of information on the syndicate, most of it very recent.

"We left an anonymous tip with the police," Emily said when they had finished, "Saying that we had been driving by and it looked like her house had been broken into. They can make what they want of the scene."

Kondou nodded.

"Thank you, Emily-chan, you've done well. How are you holding

up?"

After having witnessed that scene, Amber was wondering the same thing. Emily was tough, but Mrs. Hidston's house had been a nightmare, and they had just lost Nemu. They were all feeling down.

"Honestly, I'm pissed off," Emily replied tersely, "They kidnapped my friend, killed a nice old lady, and are trying to screw with our lives. This may sound harsh, but I'd like a chance to put a bullet in that Kaito bastard."

Amber sighed. She should have expected Emily to turn her grief at Nemu's capture to anger. Anger was something Emily could deal with.

Kondou nodded.

"I understand how you feel. We'll see what we can do about satisfying your request."

Emily gave a small laugh, though it was only partially in humor.

"Thanks."

"And how are you, Jade-chan?" Kondou moved on to the next member of the group.

There was a slight pause before Jade answered.

"I've been better, but I'm with Emily on this one. I'm angry that they would think they could walk all over us like this and I'll do what it takes to get Nemu back and bring these guys down."

Kondou nodded.

"Good. That's what I needed to hear."

There was a bit more detailing about how to contact each other with the possibility of the enemy tapping phones and how to proceed from this point. Then, it was decided that Hajime and Amber should return home as it was getting towards the afternoon and it had already been a long day. After an agreement was made that discussion would continue on the next day, when a true meeting would be held with all parties present, the phone conversation was terminated. Amber and Hajime then bid farewell to Kondou, Chizuru, and Toshizo.

"Don't worry, Amber-chan, it will work out. The shinsengumi was not known for their failures in our time, and we won't allow our reputation to be sullied now," Kondou smiled, patting Amber's head, "We'll get Miakage-san back and get this syndicate out of the way," he leaned in conspiratorially, "Then maybe you and Hajime can really settle down," he winked.

Amber smiled, blushing lightly and sneaking a glance at Hajime, who was conversing with Toshizo. Sensing her gaze, he looked over and met her eyes. He gave his own slight smile in return, his eyes soft.

"I'd like that," she replied.

She was surprised when Toshizo took her arm and pulled her aside, his grip firm but gentle. He set her in front of him and looked down at her seriously.

"I want you to ensure that you and both of your friends have everyone's numbers in your phones," his commanding tone left no room for argument, or disobedience for that matter.

He looked at her shrewdly for a moment.

"Saito says that Souji is teaching Jade how to use a kodachi and that Emily can shoot, but that you have shown no interest in learning combat skills. I know that you two are rarely apart, but you should know how to defend yourself in some manner."

Amber was surprised by his worry over her wellbeing. She expected this from Kondou, who seemed intent on acting as a father-figure to everyone, but not from Toshizo. She sighed slightly.

"My adoptive parents had me trained in a form of hand to hand before their deathsâ€¦I gave up on it after they were killed, but I do know how to defend myself to an extent," she paused, "My father was a police officer and he didn't think it was a good idea for a child in his family to be unable to have at least some training."

Toshizo nodded, his facial expression changing to show the barest amount of satisfaction.

"That's fine. Get back into practice. Saito may not be familiar with this form of martial arts, but he'll serve as a good enough partner for you to practice with."

Amber could not help but nod in agreement. Toshizo was a commander, and obviously used to having his orders followed. While she doubted he would truly do anything to her for disobedience, she would rather not test him.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Chizuru made sure to take the time to wish her well. Then, Amber and Hajime departed, climbing into Amber's car, she in the driver's side and he in the passenger's.

Their drive to their destination had been silent as they pondered what had happened, the mood made serious by Nemu's kidnapping. Now, however, with a plan in motion and having had time to process, the air was lighter for both of them. Their joined hands rested between the seats and the quiet was comfortable rather than serious.

Finally, Hajime spoke.

"I'm sorry for suddenly kissing you earlier," he said in his soft, deep voice.

Amber felt her cheeks immediately grow hot. The bluntness of the apology had startled her. It wasn't that Hajime was tactless, he just did not see the need to be anything but straightforward. Having grown

up in a society where it was often customary to lead up to something like this, Amber had to take a moment before replying.

"It's alright," she replied.

He gave a small sigh, closing his eyes. Amber glanced at him to catch his expression before refocusing on the road.

"I should have asked your permission."

Amber found her lips quirking slightly. From her memories as Airi, she knew that it had been very forward of him to just kiss her like he had. Still, she did not mind. In her second life, she had been raised in a time where a kiss was not as scandalous as it previously had been. And they had both rather enjoyed it. She could not help what she said next.

"You have my permission to kiss me whenever you like."

The way his blue eyes snapped open to focus on her face caused her cheeks to flare bright red. Maybe that had been too forward for him and he felt awkward—it was still a bit difficult to read his emotions sometimes.

"Are you truly?" he asked after a pause.

Amber's eyes darted to him. His gaze was not awkward, but rather intense and calculating.

"Y-yes," she stuttered slightly, "Truly."

After a moment longer, he smiled, bringing their joined hands to his lips and pressing a kiss to her fingers.

"Alright."

Amber could not help but smile shyly in return. He really was perfect.

* * *

><p>Emily sighed, putting her head in one hand. She could feel a headache coming on. Too much was happening too fast. Nemu's kidnapping, Merik Keikyoku's call, the investigation of the crime scene, and the plan to move forward. One thing after another in quick succession, just in one day. She ran a hand through her light hair, tugging it from its ponytail. It fell around her face in a curtain of light brown waves, hiding her drawn expression.<p>

She had always loved action stories. Action with a bit of romance, or romance with a bit of action. Now, however, that she was living one, she was not sure how she felt. Their lives really were in danger. Nemu really was gone. There really was a man who loved her wholeheartedly and who she loved in the same way.

A hand on her head interrupted her thoughts. Sano, it had to be Sano, no one else would touch her so gently, stroked her hair.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked softly.

She looked up. It was just them in the living room now. Heisuke and Shinipachi had decided that the mood needed lightened and gone to attempt to show the other up in video games. Souji, tired from his restless night of dealing with his Rasetsu side, had gone to take a nap. Jade had gone with him and the two were undoubtedly curled up together on his bed by this time.

She smiled wanly.

"Just hoping that everything works out okay."

Sano nodded, eyes on her face. He could not promise that everything would be alright. Nor did he know how to comfort her completely without making that promise. After a moment of silence, he smiled gently, an idea coming to mind.

"Why don't we watch one of those movies you were telling me about?" he asked.

Emily smiled, knowing that he was attempting to pull her thoughts away from the current situation. She reached over and took his hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Alright. You can choose which one you think you'll like."

His smile widened. He winked.

"I'll choose something that looks fun."

Despite her worries, Emily found herself grinning happily. She stood, still holding his hand.

"Good. We need a bit of fun."

17. Prisoner

Okay, I lied, the action is in the chapter after this one. I needed to put this in the middle though because it sets up for what's coming next. A lot of stuff has happened since I last posted. We had a scare where my mom had symptoms like those preceding a heart attack and she went to the ER. She's alright, but the doctor completely blew her off and said 'it's nothing'. Really? Heart attack-like symptoms in a 43 year old woman whose father died of a massive heart attack at 45 is nothing? Thanks, Doc, you're making me have a lot of faith in the health system.

On the bright side, I went to Florida for Spring Break to visit my grandparents. Despite that they feel the need to argue all the time, it was fun to be down there. I'm headed over to my best friend's house in a couple hours to introduce her to Hakuouki and Hellsing Ultimate (I'm escaping my little brother's birthday party where a bunch of teenage boys are taking over the house T_T).

**I also told my mom about how successful this story has been and she told dad, XD. They were both really excited and suggested that, once I finish the fanfic, I use the same basic plot in an original fiction so that I could put it into a novel without getting sued. I was surprised. Normally mom's not big on fanfics ^^ . Dad thinks the plot's pretty cool (he had me describe it to him as he drove me back

from the airport).**

I hope you enjoy the chapter and find Merik as sexy as I do. I've actually been RPing with him as one of my main characters for about five years now and thought I'd write him into this. My RP partner and I both think he's the hottest male character in our plotline and have expressed the wish to marry him and possibly have his future children, haha!

R&R!

* * *

><p>Nemu opened her eyes slowly, her head pounding as she did so. Her foggy mind slowly, very slowly, began to clear. A horrible, deep rumbling surrounded her, causing the foggiest to be that much more confusing. She began to sit up from lying on her side, her body cushioned by what felt like padded leather, moving her hands to assist herself. However, her hands jerked to a stop just a few inches from each other, behind her back. The shock of this caused her consciousness to return fully and her eyes snapped open.<p>

She first registered that she was on a plane. At least, she assumed she was from the shape of the cabin and the way it was laid out. That would also explain the rumbling. Her eyes narrowed as her thoughts caught up with the situation. If she was on a plane, she was being transported a very long distance. She had no idea where, as she had been unconscious during the loading. The plane was obviously private, what with its minimal seating and numerous luxuries. Still, no matter how nice the hearse, her fate remained the same.

Next, she registered that she was not alone. Her eyes darted over to find her companion.

Merik sat in a seat across the aisle from her, reclining in a padded leather chair, which had been rotated to face her fully. He watched her unblinkingly, leaning his head on his fist. His arm was propped against one rest and his legs were crossed, black boots brought into focus by the positioning. His long silver hair cascaded over his shoulders and around his handsome face as he lounged there like some kind of ancient god of beauty and war. His daisho leaned against the chair at his left side, as sitting with them tied to his belt would have been impossible. Nemu fleetingly wondered if his katana still had her blood on its blade. Upon meeting her gaze, Merik's lips curved in a smile, his eyes catching the expression, but not fully.

"Good morning, princess."

His voice, a deep baritone, was familiar and warm. It brought back memories of nights under the stars, hours spent training together in the courtyard, and trips during which he had guarded her. It also brought memories of glances stolen across rooms, words whispered when no one else was listening, and a forbidden kiss given in haste. Nemu had to stop herself from smiling back, had to remind herself that he was the enemy, no matter their history and past relationship.

"Merik," Nemu's voice was cold and unforgiving.

His smile dropped slightly and his eyes lost a bit of their previous warmth. Perhaps he needed to be reminded of their current standing himself. That they were no longer children, yearning after another under her father's cruel reign and her brother's cold, watchful eye.

"Where are we going?" she continued, glancing briefly out the window.

She had a fairly good idea of what the answer was, but she wanted him to confirm it, wanted to hear it from his lips. He glanced off to the side, letting his hand drop away from his face and sitting up a bit straighter. When he spoke, his voice was pained.

"Home."

Nemu's face hardened. Even in her current state, unable to move upright, hands bound, her entire body screamed of her hatred of that word and its connotations.

"That place is not my home," she said in the same frosty tone.

She began to struggle to right herself. Normally, the cuffs would be small issue for an Oni such as herself, she would have revealed her true form in order to use her superhuman strength. However, with Merik sitting before her, she dared not try anything. She was still weak from their fight, having not eaten anything for however long and not truly having slept. Forced unconsciousness did little to replenish energy. To attempt to fight him now would be foolishness.

Merik moved, rising from his seat and crossing the distance between them in one stride. Nemu froze, watching him warily. She supposed, should he attempt to harm her, she could kick him. Her legs were still free. Contrary to what she believed his intentions to be, though, he reached into a pocket and withdrew a key. Then, gently, dropping to one knee beside her, he moved her so that he could unlock the cuffs.

Nemu was surprised by this. She had not expected him to set her hands free. She watched him as he withdrew the cuffs and set them on the floor beside her chair. Then, slowly, eyes still on him, she sat up, rubbing her wrists. Merik pushed a button on the arm of her chair, causing it to straighten so that she was in a sitting position.

"Why remove the cuffs?" she asked a bit warily.

He looked up at her, still kneeling.

"You have nowhere to go," he replied, quite simply, "And, despite my own exhaustion, you're in worse shape."

Now that he was close, Nemu could see the smudges of shadow under his golden eyes, the pale cast of his skin, the drawn look in his face. He had not come out of their battle unscathed. Though, he was right, she was in a much worse state than him at the moment. She could feel the drain from where her healing abilities had been used. Neither of them would have visible injuries, but exhaustion would show itself clearly, as it did now.

She realized that Merik was staring at her. His face was unreadable, but his eyes were swirling with emotions. He had not moved from his position beside her. With one pale hand, he reached up, causing her to stiffen. Still, he did nothing more than move her hair, black as ink, away from her face and tuck it behind her ear. His hand lingered then, gently touching her face.

"I missed you," he said softly.

Nemu's guarded expression slipped somewhat at his words. No matter how hard she tried, or what he had done, she could not hate him. He had meant too much to her, still meant too much to her. Though she would never admit it, her brother and Kazama were not the only ones she had asked her informants to watch. They had watched and reported on Merik as well. She had said that the reason was strictly for security's sake. Merik was powerful, the Miakage clan's ace. However, that had not been the only reason.

"I missed you too," she replied, just as softly.

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. His thumb stroked over her cheekbone tenderly. It was the most affection Nemu had received from a man since she had last seen him in person, over a century ago. How could she allow another man to touch her when she had so nearly lost her heart to this one, who was handsome and good and powerful? As powerful as he was, though, Merik could be exceedingly gentle. For a brief moment, she let herself remember being in his arms, feeling his hands in her hair. Then, firmly, she stopped herself. Those times were gone and, at the present moment, they were enemies.

Merik continued to caress her cheek, oblivious to her thoughts. The glint of a gold chain around her neck caught his eye. It had previously been hidden by the collar of her dress shirt, however, with the shirt hanging askew from their battle, the necklace had been revealed. With a quizzical expression, he lifted the chain up to observe it. A ring dangled from the gold links, the band equally gold. In it was set a stone of plain, green jade. Merik's eyes widened as his fingers caught the ring. Nemu watched him, expression carefully blank as he observed it. There was a long pause between them.

"I gave this to you," he finally said, the tip of one slender finger tracing over the circular stone.

"Yes," she murmured in return.

"And you've worn it all this time."

His tone was one of wonderment. In reply, Nemu slowly nodded. Merik stared at the ring for a moment longer, eyes alight. Then, his expression fell and his fist clenched around the object. He leaned his head forward against his clenched fist, closing his eyes. His bowed posture portrayed an unspoken anguish.

"If I could," he paused. Then, his voice dropped to a whisper, "If I could, I would fight for you. I would be your knight, your champion rather than your clan's."

Nemu's eyes widened as she stared at him. She had not expected this. She knew that Merik was not entirely loyal to her brother, but, to

hear him say that, were it not for his oaths, he would fight for her, was shocking. However, he was not finished, it seemed.

"What he wants is abominable. He originally was going to pursue the Yukimura girl, butâ€¦I attempted to warn you of his plans," he looked up, "I knew you had people watching. I was going to pass a message. Someone found out and told Kaito. He changed targets then, as my punishment," Merik hesitated, "And sent me to collect you to add insult to injury," his eyes were tortured, an unfitting expression, as she knew he loved to smile, "I'm sorry. It's my fault that you were chosen."

Nemu found herself shaking her head. She had known that he had not taken her of his own accord. To hear that he had attempted to help her beforehand caused her heart to clench. Despite his bindings to Kaito, he was still her ally. He always had been.

"He would have come for me eventually. To kill me. Kaito is evilâ€¦it's not your fault."

Merik looked at her for a moment longer. Then, he gave a wry smile.

"You're so quick to forgive me."

Nemu returned the humorless smile.

"I know you, Merik. You haven't changed in a hundred years. You're far too kind to harm me of your own will."

The male Oni glanced down, still smiling slightly.

"That's trueâ€¦I would never harm you, given a choice," he looked up and met her eyes again, "Nemuâ€¦I may not get another chance to say this. You should know," he let go of the necklace, dropping his hand to hers, "I never stopped loving you."

Nemu's eyes widened again, ghost of a smile dropping. To hear that his feelings for her had remained unchanged for the past century sent yet another shock coursing through her. Seeing her expression, Merik flashed a brief smile.

"Sorry about telling you this way," he murmured.

Nemu shook her head slightly, whether in disbelief or to refute his apology, even she did not know. With shaking hands, she reached out toward his face, wanting to touch him. To tell him that, though they had not seen each other in so long, and though she was not sure of the depth her own feelings toward him, she did feel something in return. That she too remembered those whispered words and stolen glances. And that kiss. The one he had given her in the shadows of the night, the forbidden kiss that had caused her to realize just how strongly-

"Touching what is mine, Merik?" a drawling voice interrupted them.

They both froze, staring at each other, Nemu's hands almost touching his face. That voice. Nemu had not heard that voice in over a century. Merik's eyes showed a flash of fear.

"Well? Back away, servant."

Reluctantly, with the odd, jerking movements of a puppet whose strings are being pulled, Merik left Nemu's side and withdrew to his original seat. His eyes remained on Nemu's, desperate and apologetic at once.

Slowly, Nemu turned her head towards the voice.

On a television set into the wall of the cabin, her brother's image filled the screen. It had previously been hidden by a panel, which must have moved while she and Merik were focused on each other. Though she did not see it, she suspected that there was a camera hidden near the television that allowed Kaito to view the cabin of the plane. His golden eyes were fixed unerringly on her face, a victorious smirk on his lips. Nemu's heart stopped. There was her brother, her enemy, so sure in his power. After a long moment, her shock wore away and her eyes narrowed in hatred.

"Kaito," she hissed.

He looked bored, despite his smirk, sitting on his throne, his head propped against a hand. He looked exactly as she remembered, not bothering to take on a human appearance. His white hair, not nearly so beautiful as Merik's, had been left carelessly to do as it wished, messy in what would have been an attractive manner if not for his coldness. His golden eyes were haughty as he looked at her through the screen, but carried a chilling calculation as well. Two horns, one above each eye on his forehead, poked through his bangs. He cocked one brow.

"I normally don't allow my whores to call me by name," he drawled, "But I suppose I'll have to forcefully break you of that habit."

Had they been in the same physical proximity, she would have spit at him in defiance. As it was, she bared her teeth in a hiss, calling him a number of rather foul names in their native tongue.

The smirk fell from his lips. He obviously did not expect her to be so spirited and was not pleased with her reaction. His gaze cut to Merik.

"You didn't beat her soundly enough, Merik. She's still too defiant."

Merik stared back silently, the only insubordination his oaths to the head of the Miakage clan allowed him. Kaito scoffed.

"Don't look so upset. You're too soft for your reputation."

He looked back to Nemu, his brows furrowing somewhat, as though he were attempting to remember something.

"I knew I made this video call for some purpose," he mused, "It was not to inform you of your situation, you are already aware," he thought for a moment, completely unhurried. Then, his face flickered as he remembered, "Ah, yes. I wanted to ask you a question. Do you remember the shinsengumi's experiments with their Oni, mm, what is your American term? Ah, ripoffs."

Nemu, still glaring, nodded once, tersely. She remembered when the Ochimizu had appeared and what it had done and still was doing.

"Good," Kaito's smirk returned, "And, just from what I have heard of your extensive spy network, I would guess that you also know that the Miakage syndicate took up work in perfecting the Ochimizu."

She did not reply, opting instead to simply glare at him. Her brother folded his hands over his crossed legs, smiling wider, like a snake that has found a particularly fat mouse.

"We succeeded," he nearly purred, "Our rasetzu retain their sanity, do not thirst for blood as severely, and do not show as many physical changes when using their abilities. They are wonderful soldiers, nearly invulnerable and completely loyal," his eyes narrowed as he continue smiling, "You appear so terribly uninterested. Perhaps what I tell you next will remove that annoying glare of yours," his tone became triumphant, "It would behoove you to know that I have dispatched twenty such men to your former home in order to dispose of your human pets and their allies."

Nemu felt her eyes widen and her lips part in surprise. She had known that Kaito would attack the girls, but, she had not thought he would do it like this. Not with his monstrous experiments. Her heart palpitated painfully in her chest.

Oh girlsâ€¦I pray that your samurai are as strong as legend portrayed them to beâ€¦|

"That's better," Kaito nearly purred, eyes glinting, "I do hope you said goodbye. It is unlikely that you will be seeing them again."

Nemu stood slowly, expression going dead. Her eyes caught the glint of the cuffs, lying forgotten on the floor. She wanted to do something, anything, to him in retaliation, even if she would suffer for it later. She did not care. She would not be broken by his threats or anything he did. Both male Oni watched her, Kaito smirking and Merik with wary eyes. Blank faced, she bent and picked up the cuffs. She could not use magic, else Merik would have restrain her. However, she could think of another way to retaliate against Kaito.

With a snarl, she whipped the cuffs across the cabin and into the television screen. She caught one satisfying glimpse of Kaito's disbelieving face before the metal embedded into the screen, cutting out the image and sending spiderweb cracks though the plasma. She stood there, breathing harder than usual, hair falling into her face. She was aware of Merik staring at her with a cross between shock and admiration.

"Don't," she said, aware that she was still able to be seen and heard through the hidden camera, "Presume to threaten me. Those girls are more powerful than you can imagine, and their allies are to be feared. I am not some weakling for you to toy with. If you continue to think that you can do so, you will be rudely awakened," her eyes narrowed, "I will ensure it. Break your forces against me and my own, you will not so easily destroy us."

With that, she slowly took her seat again, glaring towards the ruined television screen. Merik, now that he was no longer in Kaito's sights, stood and went to her side again. He knelt once more, looking up at her with something like admiration.

"I don't know whether to call you a fool or a heroâ€¦it's been a long time since anyone stood up to him like that," he said lowly.

Nemu sighed, leaning back in her chair. She felt very tired. Between her reunion with Merik and her short meeting with her brother, she was suddenly exhausted.

"Yes, I've stood up to himâ€¦but I'm still his prisoner."

Merik gently took her hand in his larger one.

"If what I've heard about your girls is true," he said, thoughtfully, "They will not allow that to be the case for long."

Nemu smiled slightly.

"I fear that you may be right."

Please, girls, don't do anything recklessâ€¦stay safeâ€¦

18. Invasion

****Here it is, the promised action! And, a surprise at the end!
flails excitedly I loved writing this chapter. I will warn you, though, it's not for the faint of heart. In fact, it gets bloody enough that I considered bumping up the rating...but the show gets pretty bloody too and it's only rated like 16+(?).****

****Hope you enjoy, please, R&R!****

WARNING: DECAPITATION, DISMEMBERMENT, AND OTHER GRAPHIC VIOLENCE!****

* * *

><p>When Jade awoke, it was nighttime. Moonlight filtered through the blinds of the single window in Souji's room. At first, she was confused. The last time she had looked at that window, directly before going to sleep, it had been late afternoon. As her mind caught up with her waking body, she realized that she must have slept through the evening and into the night. She sleepily reached over to where she thought Souji was, wanting to curl up in his arms and return to oblivion. Her hand met only an empty expanse of bed.<p>

She sat up quickly, the shock of him not being there alarming her into almost full consciousness. Her eyes, darting about the room, took in the display of the clock on the nightstand, the numbers reading _11:54_. The dark shapes of furniture loomed against the walls, barely illuminated by the moonlight. After a few moments, she finally located him, sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, leaning back against it. His sword rested, sheathed tip on the floor, against his shoulder. His head hung slightly, and he was still, the

rising and falling of his chest his only movement. Jade looked at him for a moment. When he did not move, she thought that perhaps he was asleep.

"You should go back to sleep, Jade."

His soft voice refuted her previous thought. He was very awake and very aware of what was going on. There was a long pause. Then Jade replied.

"I've already slept for a while. And now I'm awake."

Souji gave what could only be an amused sigh.

"Stubborn woman."

Jade smiled, gathering up the blanket that covered her and sliding to the floor next to him.

"You're one to talk."

He chuckled, putting an arm around her, and leaned forward enough for her to slip the blanket around the both of them. She leaned her head against his shoulder, breathing in his scent and warmth. His head rested against hers tenderly.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked after a short silence.

He shrugged lightly with the shoulder that her head was not occupying.

"Not too long. I don't sleep well at night," she could hear the frown in his voice and knew that she had caught him during one of his honest moods, when he was unlikely to hide things from her, "Just like when I first took the Ochimizu."

Jade's brows drew together in the darkness. She had known that his being awake during the day was taxing, though he had tried to conceal it. However, she had not realized that he was reverting to his rasetsu lifestyle so quickly. He would become increasingly nocturnal until he began to sleep during the day and operate at night. Unless he had the will to resist his instincts. There was also his thirst for blood to think of. As he reverted further, the thirst would become worse. Still, she knew that he would not lose himself to madness. Kazama's curse had trapped him in time. He would remain as he was, not aging or progressing forward in any way. Like a vampire from a horror novel. He would fall only as far as he had just before death, then, he would suffer in that state, constantly attempting to contain his inner demon.

"You're going to make your face stick like that," Souji said, his voice amused.

Jade could not help her light blush. His teasing, even over a small matter such as her expression, always elicited a reaction.

"You can't even see my face," she muttered.

He laughed softly.

"But I know you, Jade," his lips pressed against her hair in a chaste kiss.

Jade was about to reply when he suddenly tensed, his body going ridged. She was confused for a moment, wondering what was wrong. Then, she realized, he was suffering an attack. Images flashed through her mind, memories of the time she had seen his demonic side. The crimson eyes and bloodstained white hair. She made to lift her head, to face him and find a way to help him, not wanting him to suffer, or to become such a frightening creature. His hand gripped her arm tightly.

"Don't," his voice was strained and harsh, "Stay still."

Jade froze, heart pounding in her chest. His breathing became ragged as he attempted to control the monster within himself. The beast that wanted to crawl out, to kill and gorge on human blood. The creature that, if let loose, would harm Jade, his love. The minutes passed like hours, Jade completely still, Souji moving only to breathe, his hand clenched around his sword. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, he relaxed, panting.

Jade was silent for a moment longer, letting him calm a bit. Then, slowly, she lifted her head to look at him, eyes worried.

"Are you alright?"

Souji leaned his head back against the bed, eyes closed. Sweat ran in thin lines down his face and neck, droplets clinging to his temple and jaw. His lips were parted as he drew in air, only to release it just as quickly as his body attempted to regulate itself again. She could feel his ribs expand with each breath, still pressed against his body as she was. For a long time, he did not answer her question. Then, finally, as his pulse and breathing slowed, he opened his eyes. They moved to meet hers and he gave a smirk.

"Hai, though you might not have been, if I hadn't regained control."

Jade reached up to touch his face, her hand meeting his jaw and then sliding upwards, wiping away the sweat on his skin as she moved to caress his cheek.

"You're strong, Souji. You were one of the strongest even when you were sick. You'll never hurt me."

She felt more than saw his rueful smile as his hand left his sword and came up to cradle hers, pressing it to his face.

"You have a lot of faith in me."

On impulse, Jade leaned up and pressed her lips softly to his. It was not a heated, passionate kiss like the one that had shared earlier that day. This kiss was meant to convey her faith in him and her love for him. He accepted the kiss just as gently as she gave it, their lips meeting for only a brief moment. Then, she pulled back with a soft sigh.

"I'll always have a lot of faith in you," she murmured.

Souji looked at her, his eyes filled with something like wonderment. How fortunate they were to have each other, to have this love, this bond that not even death or time could shatter, though both had tried. He smiled then, softly, happily, and rested his forehead against hers.

"You really are an idiot for loving a guy like me."

Jade smiled back, eyes reflecting his happiness as their noses touched. Their joined hands dropped lower as their lips neared again. Jade's heart fluttered in her chest as his breath mixed with hers. He had allowed her to comfort him, even after he had feared he might harm her. He had allowed her to see him, what lay beneath that aloof, sarcastic shell. He had trusted her completely. Her heart clenched. How could she not love this man?

Their lips had just touched when Souji suddenly froze. At first, Jade thought he might be having another attack. However, then she heard it. The quiet creak of the front door. Had they not been awake, they never would have noticed. Even Souji, with his trained instincts and light sleep would not have been wakened by the sound.

Jade's eyes widened. Someone was in the house.

Souji rose slowly, silently, gripping his sword in one hand.

"Stay here," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

With the lithe silence of a predator, he crept to the door. He cracked it open so carefully that the latch did not even click with the movement of the handle. He was utterly still as he looked through the crack. Jade strained her ears and found that she could hear multiple people moving about on light feet. Someone found the creaky step a quarter of the way up the staircase. A small group moved past the door towards the kitchen. Like a cat stalking a mouse, Souji waited, watching. Slowly, silently, he slid his sword from its sheath and gripped it tightly.

Then, with a suddenness that caused Jade to jolt and gasp in surprise, he flung the door open and pounced. The sound of the blade piercing a body told Jade that he had waited for one of the intruders to pass the door before attacking. The victim grunted in surprise and pain as he was stabbed. Then, his body went limp as the moonlight illuminated him through the windows of the main hall. It was so fast that no one, not Jade, nor the man's companions, had time to react. Souji ripped his blade free. The body had not even hit the floor when he attacked again, this time, with a battle cry.

The world exploded into chaos.

Gunfire broke out, unmistakable despite the silencers obviously being used. Fortunately, it seemed that the would-be attackers were using pistols rather than dealing with anything larger in this attempted stealth mission. The invaders on the stairs began to move more quickly up the flight, abandoning silence, obviously wanting to find easier prey upstairs rather than face the samurai below. They had given up on all attempts at silence now, as they had been fully compromised.

The door across the hall from Souji's burst open and Sano emerged,

wearing his sleeping pants and t-shirt, spear in hand. Upon seeing the situation, his eyes narrowed. It seemed that, while the attackers in the kitchen were attempting to fire at Souji, the hall was too narrow for them to get a clear shot around the man directly in front of him. His sword flashed, cutting the foremost man's gun in half. He glanced at Sano, briefly, and smirked.

"Took you long enough, Sanosuke" he punctuated his sentence by cutting down across his enemy's torso before the man could react to defend himself.

Sano flashed the briefest of smiles before moving to cover Souji's back. The remaining invaders had made it through the door and were readying to crush the resistance. The front door swung shut, signaling that everyone who was coming in had done so. There was a bang as a door upstairs flew open, adding to the chaos.

"There's Saito," Sano commented, "Can you handle these here?"

Souji scoffed. He had effectively positioned his latest victim so that the others in the kitchen could not get a clear shot.

"Don't worry about things you don't have to," he replied, a bit of arrogance coloring his voice.

Sano nodded and darted off just as the gunfire from near the front door began. He would have the room needed to use his spear in the main foyer. He grinned as he twirled his spear quickly, blocking the bullets. His hands nimbly wielded his spear, years of training allowing him to use the weapon like an extension of himself. He was in the mix before any of them could take proper aim, the haft of his spear connecting with one man's head before the blade skewered another through the chest.

Upstairs, Hajime had placed himself between the top of the stairs and the girls' bedrooms. He looked at his opponents coldly, face and eyes void of emotion. His stance was relaxed, betraying nothing, and his daisho hung at his hip.

"You will not pass," he said smoothly.

The invaders took pause, observing him. They were dressed identically, in black uniforms with some sort of body armor, though their builds suggested they were all male. Their faces were hidden by masks. Oni masks. They each carried a pistol and a dagger for close combat. In the group that had mounted the stairs, there were at least seven. Numerous others were downstairs, the sounds of combat lending credence to this fact.

The foremost attacker raised his weapon, preparing to fire.

Faster than should be humanly possible, Hajime's sword flashed from its sheath, cutting cleanly through the gun. Then, in a quick reversal, he decapitated his enemy. Even as the man's head and body fell in separate directions, Hajime was beginning his deadly dance. His katana wove and slashed, cutting weapons as they were raised, limbs and torsos as they were exposed, and necks when the chance was presented. He moved like a gust of wind through the group, emerging behind him. He did not stop moving though. He quickly turned to face any who might have found the will to retaliate, despite their

injuries.

Jade's voice cut through the sounds of combat.

"Souji! Behind you!"

In the kitchen, Souji turned from dispatching his final opponent. His sword was coated in blood and it seeped onto the tile floor from the bodies in his wake. As his eyes found what Jade had been warning him about, they widened.

The first two men he had killed were standing back up. They had changed, though, from the dark assassins who had first entered the house. Their eyes were no longer hidden in the shadows of their masks, but glowed red through their visors. They rose jerkily, obviously effected by their wounds but not feeling the pain. Even as he watched, the cuts made by his sword were healing. His green eyes narrowed.

"So, we aren't the only ones who made monsters," he raised his sword, smirking through his glare, "Still, I bet if I cut off your head," he brought it down on the neck of his latest victim, who still laid on the floor, "Or stab you through the heart," his sword tip pierced the heart of the next in line, who also was prone, "You'll stay dead," he turned his eyes back towards the men who had risen and were drawing their long daggers, "Right?"

One of his newly risen opponents stepped into the kitchen, blade catching the moonlight that streamed through the widows. It glinted threateningly, not a dull metallic color, but bright silver. Souji's smirk widened. Adrenaline coursed through him. He loved the thrill of battle, the danger. The higher the stakes, the more exciting it was for him. The introduction of a silver blade into the combat reminded him of when he had been shot by a silver bullet. He had not healed directly, even with his rasetsu abilities. He had been forced to heal normally from the bullet wound. While he knew he would not die from a stab wound delivered by even a silver blade, thanks to Kazama's curse, he would suffer the pain of healing from that wound at a normal, human rate. He could not afford that. He had to be able to fight alongside his Shinsengumi brothers and protect his loved ones.

Gripping his sword, he allowed the rasetsu transformation to take him. His hair turned white from the roots outward while his eyes changed to bright, glowing red. He would need his strength in this fight. His combat trained mind quickly took stock of the situation. Six had gone through the hall. He had dispatched two permanently. The two coming at him now would keep him from ending the remaining two. Four rasetsu. He could deal with them easily in his darker form, his enhanced strength and speed would match theirs and he knew he was more skilled than they were. Still, he had to keep from being cut with those silver bladesâ€¦

His eyes caught a movement behind the two who were approaching them. They widened as he realized what it was. Jade, forgotten by the attackers as they dealt with him, the more obvious threat, had taken the kodachi he had been having her practice with. She darted out from within the bedroom and, without hesitation, slammed it into the back of one of the rasetsu. Blood splattered as the blade penetrated his body and he staggered. Still, she had not hit his heart. After a

moment taken to recover, he began to turn. Jade's dark eyes widened in disbelief.

Souji moved then, like a bullet from a gun. He was like a blur, shooting past the foremost man, cutting him across the stomach as a distraction, and then, with a shout, bringing his sword through the neck of the second, whose attention was on Jade.

Jade staggered back as her enemy's head fell aside and his body dropped. Her chest rose and fell as what she had done finally caught up with her. The adrenaline in her veins, the need she had felt to aid her love, had blocked out the feeling of the sword penetrating a body, grinding against bone and piercing organs. She shuddered, aware of the blood that had splattered her person.

Quickly, Souji pulled the kodachi from the dead man and thrust it back into her hands. She gripped it instinctively as he then pulled her slightly behind him, facing the now recovering man who had been nearly disemboweled.

"I don't know whether to be angry with you or proud of you," Souji said in amused exasperation.

Jade looked up at him, taking in his red eyes and white hair, and the blood of his opponents, staining his pale skin. He looked like a monster. However, his smirk and the glance he threw her were so familiar that there could be no doubt that he was the man she had fallen in love with.

"S-sorry," she said, a bit quietly, "I was worried about you."

He gave a short laugh, stepping up to meet the man as he charged. Their blades clashed with a clang. And locked, both trying to gain dominance over the other.

"The heart is the weak point, Jade-chan."

Souji disengaged with a tight flourish and demonstrated his point by circumnavigating the man's defense and stabbing him through the heart. Even with the body armor covering his torso, a blade wielded by a master cut through him as easily as any other man. He gave a gurgling cry and fell with a thud as Souji retracted his blade.

"But it was a good try."

He gave her one of his catlike smiles even as a third opponent began to rise. Then, raising his sword, he turned to face his next target.

Despite her shock at having entered combat and stabbed a man, Jade felt oddly calmed by the ease at which Souji spoke to her. His surety in battle was soothing. If he was not afraid, Jade felt that she had no reason to be either. A little down the hall, she saw a fourth rasetu begin to rise. She glanced at where Souji was exchanging blows with the third. It seemed that perhaps this one had a bit more skill, as he was managing to keep up with Souji, to an extent. Afraid that the fourth rasetu may catch her love from behind, she gripped the kodachi tightly to stop her hands from shaking. Four days of sword training by no means made her skilled with a blade, but she knew enough to put the weapon through the man's chest or neck. She

sprinted forward with a cry, catching the man as he rose fully. He did not have time to react as she caught him fully in the chest, just left of the center, where she estimated his heart to be. She threw all of her weight behind the blade, not being as strong as Souji, and drove it in.

She knew she had succeeded when the man gave a spasm and then went limp. Jade sank to the floor with him as the weight of his body pulled them down. She stared at his masked face in shock as his head hung back. Then, her trembling redoubled.

She had just killed a man.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Emily's door flew open and she emerged, carrying her hunting rifle, sound suppressor fixed to the barrel, in one hand and spare cartridges in the other. She had awakened when the gunfire began and, at first, panicked. Then, as the sounds of combat had grown louder, she had heard Sano shout something from downstairs. The sound of his voice had caused something else to push aside the fear, a strange, protective instinct. Her man was fighting and she was still in her room, hiding. She had felt suddenly disgusted with herself. A wife's place was at her husband's side. While they were not married, Emily felt that the same principle applied. Skilled warrior or not, she would not allow Sano to fight without her aid.

As she moved to the railing that lined the second floor, she saw Hajime in combat a few yards away. Two bodies lay at his feet, both headless. However, some the men he was fighting were sporting missing limbs, which should have incapacitated them. They barely seemed to notice though, as they attempted to overpower him.

"Saito!"

Heisuke was running up the stairs, coming to aid his friend.

Sure that the two of them could handle even men who were not stopped by loss of limb, Emily finished her trek to the railing and looked down into the foyer. Sano and Shinipachi were fighting together, attempting to bring down a number of opponents. It seemed that Sano, who had obviously arrived first from his current state, had succeeded in 'killing' a number of opponents. However, even as she looked on, Emily saw one of the fallen enemies stand up.

With shaking hands, she gripped her rifle and rested her elbows on the railing, bending at the waist and bracing herself. She took a deep breath and looked through the scope at the man who had just stood up. The magnified view the scope gave her showed her that a wound in his chest was healing even as he moved to reenter combat.

_Just like a deerâ€¦_she adjusted her aim_, through the headâ€¦_

She pulled the trigger and a muted blast accompanied the jarring impact of the recoil. The man reeled back as the bullet went through his head, cracking his mask with the impact. He fell back, twitching, but not dead.

She pulled back to observe the combat. Sano looked up and saw her. He frowned briefly, displeased with her being in harm's way. Shinipachi,

however, flashed a grin, driving his sword into his opponent's chest.

"Aim for the heart!" he yelled up to her.

She nodded, though he did not see it, as he was diving back into the fray. Emily then took aim again, on the same target. Despite her having put a bullet in his head, he was standing up again, the blood flow slowing to a trickle. She sighted through the scope once more, centering in on his chest and a little to the left. She fired again and blood erupted from the new wound. He fell again, still and unmoving. Emily took aim again, waiting until she had a clear shot in the melee to drive another bullet home into the heart of an enemy. She had two left, as her cartridge only held five.

She began to take careful aim again, ready to wipe out the men who threatened her and her family. Then, Heisuke shouted in a voice that made her blood run cold. There was panic in the single word that broke through the remaining sounds of fighting.

"Amber!"

Her head whipped around, eyes immediately finding the cause of his distress. One of the limbless men had broken way from his fellows in the confusion and, somehow, gotten ahold of Amber. With his one remaining arm, he held her, dagger against her throat. Emily could see the way the younger woman's chest rose and fell quickly in fear, though her expression remained neutral. Her eyes were locked with Hajime's as he stood, sword raised, helpless and surrounded by the bodies of his enemies. Below, Sano and Shinpachi finished the last of their attackers and all was quite except for the sound of heavy breathing.

Amber's heart pounded in her chest. Despite her expression, she was terrified. She felt the cold sharpness of silver at her neck, threatening to slit the fragile skin and spill the blood beneath. She stared into Hajime's eyes. He was her solace. Despite her weakness in being captured, he would be strong enough to save her. He was as angry as Amber had ever seen him, eyes narrowed, lips pressed into a thin line. His right hand was clenched into a fist while he gripped his sword tightly with the other, knuckles turning white. He knew how scared she really was. He too was a master at concealing emotion and knew the signs that showed how truly frightened she felt.

Her captor tightened his grip, causing her to flinch.

"You will allow me to pass, or I will kill her," his eyes, glowing red behind his mask, darted to Emily, "Drop your gun."

Slowly, Emily released her weapon so that it fell to the floor at her feet. She held up her empty hands in a show of being unarmed. Slowly, Heisuke, too complied, stepping aside for the man and his hostage to pass. Hajime, however, remained firmly in the way. In response, the man's dagger dug into Amber's throat, causing her to flinch as a bead of red blood ran from a newly made cut, easily visible. After a long pause, Hajime stepped side, eyes burning with a murderous intent.

The man slipped past them, watching them as he pulled his hostage along. All eyes were on him as he made his way down the stairs. Jade

and Souji had emerged from the hall upon hearing Heisuke's cry, both splattered with blood, Souji still in his full, monstrous form. Sano and Shinipachi stood very still as the man passed from the stairs to the open foyer, moving toward the door. Everyone was waiting for a chance to attack and save Amber. Hajime slowly followed them, eyes remaining on Amber's face as he did so.

Jade's eyes darted up to meet Emily's. Emily nodded. As soon as the man had set foot out the door, she would seize her gun and shoot him. She was fairly certain she could do it without hitting Amber. Jade tapped Souji's arm, drawing his attention, and whispered to him, lips barely moving. He gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

The man reached the door and roughly jostled Amber.

"Open it."

With a trembling hand, she reached out and gripped the doorknob. Emily tensed, ready to move for her gun. The room was suddenly still, each person waiting for an opening.

Amber tugged the door open.

Before anyone could make a move, a gunshot rang out. Amber's captor jerked as the bullet connected. Amber herself gave a startled cry, twisting away as the man fell, so that his dagger did not drag over her throat. He fell to the ground, a hole in his mask. A second shot rang out and another hole appeared in his chest. He went limp.

Everything was still and quiet, all eyes on the door. Jade clutched Souji's arm. Emily stood, dumbfounded, the rifle still at her feet, mouth hanging open. Amber slowly looked up from the body to the door. A figure stood on the porch just outside.

With a few short steps, the figure moved into the house, boots clunking on the hard ground. As it came into the light, it was revealed to be a rather small woman with bright purple hair. She held her gun easily in one hand, coming to a stop next to the body.

"Well," she said in a conversational tone, "I got here just in time."

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Emily broke the silence.

"Tess?"

19. A New Ally

****Hello! Sorry about the time between updates. The end of the semester was crazy! But, it's done now and I came out with straight A's! My Cambodia proposal was also accepted! Now, I've just got to find a job, XD.****

****I actually wrote this during the super long car ride to Kentucky and back (7 hours one way), when I wasn't sleeping. There's something about being in the car that just knocks me out. At least, when I'm**

being a passenger. Don't worry, I'm a safe driver.**

This chapter is pretty long and kinda slow, but it was necessary to move the plot along. We also get some sweetness between Sano and Emily and Hajime and Amber. To those of you waiting for the lemons, I realized that the plot is panning out in such a way that all three of them should be fairly soon, Sano and Emily's being within the next few chapters.

Thank you for your patience! Please, R&R!

* * *

><p>Tess glanced up to where Emily stood on the second floor. Her lips pulled into a slow, easy smile and she nodded in greeting, her purpled hair shifting slightly. She topped it off by giving a small salute, kicking the door shut behind her. The room was quiet as those gathered took in the newcomer. Amber held her throat, still gasping for breath as she put pressure on the nick in her pale neck.<p>

Then, before anyone else could move or question the situation, Hajime practically flew across the room and gathered Amber into his arms, startling not only her but everyone around them. Her eyes widened as he held her tightly, almost driving the air from her lungs. Then, as the still-fading adrenaline from the night's events finally faded and exhaustion took over, she wrapped her arms around him as well. She began to tremble, the aftereffects of fear setting in. In those terrible minutes previously, as the knife was held to her throat, so close to taking her life, and her eyes had locked with Hajime's, she had wondered if it would be the last time she saw him. She had prayed in those minutes that he would be fast enough to save her before the enemy disposed of her, that it would not be the last time she looked into his beautiful blue eyes. She had been sure, when she opened the door, that, as soon as the enemy thought he could run, he would split the fragile flesh of her neck and kill her. Whether Nemu's theory that some of her power had been transferred to the girls was true or not, there was no doubt in Amber's mind that the silver dagger would have killed her.

A small, choked sob escaped her, further breaking her normally composed façade.

"Shhh, I have you. You're safe now," Hajime murmured to her. Then, his jaw tightened, "Gomen'nasai."

His free hand fisted in her nightshirt and, suddenly, nothing else mattered. It was as though the world had faded away, leaving only the two of them. He had failed in protecting her. He very much blamed himself for her being held hostage. It was unforgivable, dishonorable. He would not be surprised if she did not forgive him either. However, Amber shocked him by shaking her head quickly. Her head lifted from his shoulder so that her cheek pressed against his, allowing him to feel the wetness of the few tears she had shed.

"They would've killed me if you hadn't been there," she clung to him, again burying her face in the crook of his neck, "You stopped most of them. It's not your fault" she sniffed, trying to contain herself despite her emotional state, "Arigato, Hajime. You protected me as

best you could."

Hajime tried not to flinch at that. A part of him was glad that she did not blame him. Another part felt the sting of the words 'as best you could'. He had still failed. He had not been strong enough to keep them all from getting to her. He had very nearly lost something very precious.

Souji's voice brought reality crashing back. He had stepped in front of Jade, gently but firmly pushing her behind him.

"Hey, thanks for shooting him and everything, but who the hell are you?"

His voice was a low growl. He had yet to return to his normal state and had just come through combat. Whether she had killed an enemy or not, he was not in any mood to risk the lives of his friends and loved ones any further this night. His hand gripped his sword tightly, his body tense. If he did not like the newcomer's answer, he would cut her down.

She looked over at him, her eyes flashing with oni gold. An easygoing smile still pulled at her lips. She slipped her gun into the holster at her hip and held up her hands, showing him that she was unarmed.

"Relax, Mr. Okita, I'm not gonna hurt anyone," she cocked her head, smile widening, "Cept the Syndicate bastards."

Souji's eyes narrowed, remaining on the young woman. Heisuke shouted down from the balcony above.

"You didn't answer the question! Who are you? And how do you know Emily-chan?"

In his agitation, he had dropped back into using Japanese honorifics. He had slipped into his rasetsu form sometime during the battle and now sported the same white hair and red eyes as Souji. The blood of his enemies splattered his pale skin and hair, giving his youthful face a much more ghoulish appearance. Tess glanced up at him, seeming unperturbed by his demonic state.

"I'm Tessa Winters," her eyes flickered to Emily, who was staring at her, utterly confused, "And I met your Emily-chan on spring break a couple of years back. We've stayed in contact online ever since."

Emily's brows drew together as more than one set of eyes glanced to her. The confusion of the night's events mixed with the strangely disjointed feeling of seeing a person who is out of context, creating a swirling cocktail of muddled thoughts. It took her a moment to reconcile the image of this out of context person with the carnage of the battle's aftermath, then another to reconcile this with the fact that it was in her home. After the brief pause, she spoke.

"Yeahâ€¦we met when I went down to Florida a couple of years agoâ€¦" she spoke just loud enough to be heard, her tone betraying her confusion, "Butâ€¦Tessâ€¦howâ€¦whatâ€¦?" she trailed off, lacking the ability to convey her thoughts.

Tess raised one brow, black rather than purple.

"How did I get here and what am I doing here?" she supplemented.

Emily nodded, looking agitated as well as puzzled. She was still wearing her night clothes, her hair mussed and tangled. She shifted forward a bit to lean against the railing. Her foot nudged her discarded rifle and she looked down, surprised for a moment. She had forgotten about it in the sudden turn of events. Realizing that it would not be best to leave this lying around, she bent to retrieve it.

Tess remained standing before the door, the body of the man she had killed laying at her feet, Amber and Hajime still locked in an embrace just a few feet away. The couple's eyes were on her now, suspicious blue and tired grey. Souji still stood in front of Jade, though, from the way he was trembling, his eyes narrowed, he was struggling. Having used his rasetsu powers after a lack of rest, he was exhausted, trying to contain his thirst for blood. Heisuke appeared to be in a similar state, though, he did not seem to be as tired as Souji. The ever-growing pools of red on the floor around the bodies of the fallen threatened to send them both across a line that no one was interested in seeing them cross. Jade gripped Souji's arm, eyes darting between him and Tess, worry for him and distrust of this newcomer warring inside her.

Unwilling to be away from Emily any longer, especially when she appeared to be so dazed and confused, Sano quickly moved to the stairs, running up them in a startling break in the stillness that had settled. Tess's eyes followed him before darting from face to face once more. Shinipachi moved slightly to stand in front of her, far enough away that, if she attacked, he would have time to retaliate, but close enough that if he needed to quickly subdue her, he could. When her eyes rested on him, he flashed what would have been an easy-going smile if not for the grimness in his eyes.

"Come on now," he said, almost conversationally, "You've had enough time to think about your answer. Speak up."

Tess shrugged, hands shifting so that her palms were slightly upturned.

"Alright. I got here by car, and not a moment too soon it seems. As for why I came—well, I think that I'd need to talk to your commander about that, as it concerns everyone here."

"Whether you assisted us or not, we have no idea who you are and have no reason to trust you. We can relay a message if that's what is needed," Hajime addressed her directly for the first time, his voice cold.

Souji sneered, his lip curling upward to reveal his teeth.

"Hajime's right. As if we would let you near Kondou-san."

The purple-haired woman sighed.

"I had hoped that my knowing Emily would be enough to gain a bit of

trust. And I _did_ just save Amber's lifeâ€|"

She held up a finger, motioning for them to wait. With her other hand, she reached for her pocket. Immediately, Shinipachi gripped his sword, bringing it up into a middle guard. Tess made an amused sound.

"Honestly, like I'd attack a bunch of undead samurai. I pride myself on being sassy, not stupid."

From her pocket, she withdrew a folded paper. Keeping one hand carefully raised, she extended the paper with the other. After a moment, Shinipachi stepped forward and took it.

Stepping back to his original position, he opened the paper, revealing it to be a white stationary with blue bordering. A second sheet fell away, fluttering to the ground face up. After a brief moment, Jade gave a gasp and darted forward, around Souji. He made to grab her but missed as she had been expecting that and had twisted to avoid him. Paying no mind to his annoyed 'tch', she knelt beside Shinipachi and picked up the paper. Her dark eyes scanned it, wide with surprise and hope. Souji followed to stand behind her, unwilling to allow her to leave his side. After a moment, she looked up at Tess, who watched her with raised brows.

"This is Nemu's writing and signatureâ€|.where did you get this?"

Tess interlocked her fingers behind her head, leaning it back against her joined hands.

"I received that letter sometime during the past week. If you look on the first page, you'll see it's addressed to me," she smirked, "I didn't steal it."

Shinipachi glanced down at the paper in his hand, taking a moment to decipher the flowing script of Nemu's handwriting.

"It's addressed to 'Tessa Winters, my old friend'."

Above, Emily scoffed. Sano had reached her side and wrapped an arm around her as she leaned into him. Her rifle dangled in one hand, her ammunition lying at her feet.

"Another old friend?" she asked, "Well, this night just gets better and better."

While she was still confused, her initial shock had worn off, allowing her to return to her usual slightly sarcastic self. Sano squeezed her arm, knowing that she was being rude only because she did not appreciate finding out that Nemu had kept even more secrets from them. Not only that, but a secret involving someone whom Emily had thought to be a friend.

Tess pouted slightly, dark brows drawing together.

"Don't be mean Emily. I'm your friend too."

Emily raised a brow, looking unimpressed.

"Sure you're not just one of Nemu's informants? Sent to keep an eye on me the one time I managed to get away by myself?"

"She might have asked me to keep an eye on you if I saw you while I was there."

Emily scoffed again, letting her head fall against Sano's shoulder.

All other activity was halted by the sudden distinct sound of a cell phone vibrating, followed by a high-pitched ringing. All eyes moved to the dead man who had held Amber hostage, pinpointing the source of the ringing. The sound repeated twice more, then, just as suddenly, stopped.

"What was that?" Heisuke asked after a moment.

He had returned to his human form, unable to handle being in that of a rasetsu any longer. He leaned against the railing of the balcony above, sword held almost limply in one hand.

"That," Tessa replied, voice grim, eyes fixed on the body of the man at her feet, "Was these guys' handler realizing that his pets won't be returning his call," she looked up, her smile gone, "We need to move. Reinforcements or an attack of a different kind may not be far behind."

Looks were exchanged between the men of the Shinsengumi. Everyone was already tired from the first fight, and minor injuries had been acquired. If a second, larger wave came, it may be difficult to fend them off. Especially when the girls would need to be defended. After a short pause, Hajime took charge. Reluctantly, he released Amber and stepped away.

"She's right, we may not have much time. Pack only what you need. We're leaving."

Jade looked up to meet Souji's eyes. They had faded back to their usual green. He gave a brief nod and motioned with his head. Slowly, she rose, holding the paper of the letter close to her heart. The couple walked together as far as the foot of the stairs before parting ways, Souji going to his room and Jade to hers.

Shinipachi cleaned the blood from his blade, wiping it on the clothes of one of the dead men. Then, he slid it into its sheath, glancing up at Heisuke.

"Yo, Heisuke, you coming?"

The younger man did much the same, cleaning and sheathing his blade.

"Hai, hai, calm down Shinipachi. Can't you go downstairs by yourself?"

Heisuke waited for Jade to pass him at the top of the stairs before coming down himself. Together, he and Shinipachi made their way down to the basement to pack their things.

Hajime turned back to Amber. They looked at each other for a moment.

Then, gently, he brushed his fingertips over her neck, where the cut had stopped bleeding. When he pulled his hand away, his skin was slightly reddened with her still-damp blood. Upon seeing it, his expression hardened. Amber touched his cheek in return and he immediately softened, eyes closing briefly as he leaned into her hand. Then, with the slowness of someone unwilling to leave, Amber let her hand fall and went upstairs.

Hajime's eyes followed her for a moment. Then he looked at Tess, his expression again unreadable. The softness he had shown with Amber was gone, replaced by the samurai who would do anything to protect what was dear to him.

"We will trust you for now. But, if you betray us, or if my commanders deem you a threat, I will kill you."

Tess gave a small smile that did not reach her eyes.

"Nemu was right, you are frigid unless it comes to that girl," she replied, almost thoughtfully.

After one last cold look, Hajime mounted the stairs, following Amber up them and leaving the newcomer alone in the foyer.

* * *

><p>Emily crammed clothes into a travel case with a vengeance, pulling underwear, pants, and shirts from drawers and transferring them without really looking at them. Every few seconds, she would run off to another part of her room and collect something to put into a separate bag. Sano stood near the closed door, having followed her when Hajime had ordered them all off. He leaned against the wall, arms folded, spear resting in the crook of one elbow. His eyes followed her, taking in every detail. Her entire body was tense as she moved and her eyes were distant. He could tell that her mind was whirling, and that, while she was somewhat consciously packing, she was thinking about numerous other things at once. He let her go for a few minutes before speaking.<p>

"Emily."

She stopped suddenly at the sound of his voice, eyes clearing. She stared at the pair of jeans in her hand before placing it into the suitcase.

"Are you alright?" Sano continued without waiting for her to respond.

Emily glanced at him, returning to her dresser to close the mostly empty drawers. After doing so, she sighed, leaning her head against the top of the dresser, near the alarm clock that Amber had rigged only a short time ago.

"No," she replied softly.

Sano quickly leaned his spear against the wall and went to her. Gently, he tugged her away from the dresser and into an embrace. She relaxed at the feeling of his strong arms around her, of his heart beating steadily in his chest. His scent sent a wave of calm through her. Her eyes seemed to close of their own will as the immediate

comfort of all that was Sano encompassed her. Slowly, she returned his embrace, gripping the back of his shirt and pressing her cheek against his chest.

"The battle or Tessa?" he asked quietly, voice rumbling against her ear.

"Both."

"Ah."

Silence fell. He would not push her, he saw no reason to. She would speak when she was ready. The seconds passed slowly as they stood there together. Then, Emily spoke again.

"I kinda suspected Tess, I guess. I meanâ€|she was one of those too good to be true things. I was taking college courses and went to Florida for Spring Break. We were sitting next to each other on the plane and hit it off. We hung out all week, even ended up sharing a hotel room and sitting together on the flight back. I just wrote it off as coincidence, but, looking back, knowing what I do nowâ€|" she trailed off, her mind moving on, "â€|.Killing them wasn't like shooting a deer."

Sano tensed briefly. Then, he began to rub her back soothingly.

"Noâ€|killing people isn't like killing animals," he agreed.

"I keep wondering," she paused for a moment, "If they had families. If I just killed some girl's dad, like what happened with Amber's dadâ€|"

Sano nodded.

"They could have. But, I doubt it. Men with families fight with more desperation. Those men were too cold. They were fighting on orders, not for a cause."

Emily relaxed, knowing that he would not just say things to make her feel better. She was suddenly glad for his years of combat experience that enabled him to understand the difference in how a man with a cause fought versus a man without one.

She nodded against his chest.

"Good. That makes me feel better."

Sano patted her back lightly, his hold on her not loosening.

"Would you have killed them if you knew they did have families?"

She tensed, her lips pressing together into a thin line. Memories of standing at a funeral with Nemu and Jade flashed through her mind. Amber stood between two caskets, looking down into first one and then another, her young eyes made old by the grief. She was alone again, the parents who were not truly her parents dead and gone. Her adoptive father's coworkers stood within Emily's range of hearing, muttering amongst themselves. They said things like 'stabbed numerous times', 'bullet wounds too', 'so much blood', 'almost couldn't

recognize the corpses', 'just glad the girl was at school when it happened', 'on her birthday too', 'we got there before she did', 'no, she didn't see anything'.

Then, those memories were replaced by those from earlier. She relived her hopelessness as the rasetsu man dragged Amber down the stairs, holding a knife to her throat. Her fear as she saw Sano in combat. Her worry for the others as they fought off their attackers. Her eyes hardened at these memories.

"Yes. Because they tried to kill mine. I might feel sorry for the people they're leaving behind, but, if they want to live, they'd better not screw with me or my family."

Sano hugged her tighter upon hearing her reply, seeming to find relief in it.

"Now I don't have to worry about you hesitating and getting hurt," he murmured.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, a small smile pulled at Emily's lips. She tilted her head up to look at him. With one hand, she brushed his hair back from his face, tucking it behind his ear.

"I know you'd be mad if I got hurt," she said lightly, "And I definitely don't want that."

His lips quirked upward as well.

"Good, I don't want to be mad."

Emily grinned briefly, standing on tiptoe to press a quick kiss to his lips. Then, she gently disengaged from his arms, giving him a light push towards the door.

"Go on. You have to get packed too. You'll have no clothes otherwise."

Sano's smile widened as he let her push him. He winked.

"I doubt you'd mind."

Emily shook her head.

"I wouldn't. But I don't want other women to see you without clothes."

With a short laugh, Sano gathered his spear and left Emily to her packing, going off to do his own.

* * *

><p><p>

Hajime was waiting in the hall when Amber emerged from her room, dragging two large bags of clothes and personal effects. Upon seeing him, her eyes brightened. She had packed quickly so that she could see him sooner. After going through her near death experience, she had no desire to be away from him again. In her mind, her being

captured was connected to being separated from Hajime. Therefore, if she was with him, she would not be hurt.

Upon seeing her, the corner of his mouth pulled upward slightly. His blue eyes ran over her figure, as though he were reassuring himself that she truly was alright. Then, they moved back up to her face.

"Are you ready?" he asked gently.

Amber nodded.

She had changed into clothing more suitable for traveling and tied her hair back into an almost haphazard ponytail.

"What about you?" she asked in return.

He nodded as well.

"I have what I need."

His daisho hung at his hip, belted with a white belt over his black jeans. He too had changed out of the bloodied clothes of battle and into something more comfortable. His own bags sat at his feet, neatly packed and zipped up. As usual, he was cool and collected, knowing exactly what he needed.

Amber came to a stop next to him, dropping her bags as well.

"Did you call Hijikata-san?"

Hajime nodded.

"We'll be staying the night at their house. Then, in the morning, we'll move on. They're packing as well, gathering up any information that would be useful to the enemy. Jade and the newcomer are doing the same here," he glanced at the attic stairs, "We can't afford to let them know how much intelligence we have on them."

Amber nodded, glad that there was some semblance of a plan after the chaos of the previous hours. Much like her love, she preferred to know what was going on and what the next move should be. Emily was someone who, as Nemu sometimes said, 'flew by the seat of her pants', and could adapt quickly to a situation even without a plan. Jade was somewhere in between. She liked to have a plan, but she could also adapt, as shown by her actions in combat.

At the thought of the combat, Amber's lips pressed into a thin line and her eyes darkened. She once again relived the experience of being held hostage. A shudder ran down her spine as her hand came up to her neck, rubbing over the small cut that had been made there. Hajime watched her keenly, his own face hardening as he followed her train of thought.

Without a word, he reached out and pulled her into his arms, causing her to drop her bags. He hugged her tightly.

"I won't let that happen again, Amber. You're not leaving my side."

After a hesitant moment, Amber hugged him back.

"Alright. I'll stay right next to you."

The sounds of the others packing and running about to gather supplies kept them from sinking into another moment of solitude, as did the stench of blood. Amber had been successfully not looking at it, focusing instead on the tasks at hand or on Hajime. However, the smell turned her stomach, whether she was looking at it or not. What made it worse was the thought that her love and her friends had been the ones to spill it. Even Emily and Jade had killed in the battle. But it had been for good reason. All of them had been protecting each other. Only she had been useless, taken hostage and used against her friends. If Tess had not saved her—

She stopped that trail of thought, hugging Hajime tighter.

"Hajime—will you teach me to fight?"

He stilled in her arms, surprised but not showing it completely. She could sense that he was thinking it over, considering her motives and what had made her ask so suddenly.

"—Are you sure?" he finally asked.

Amber nodded, cheek sliding against his shirt.

"I don't want to be useless again," she said softly, "Jade was able to help Souji and watch his back, Emily was able to protect Sano—I want to be able to fight alongside you."

Previously, she had been uninterested in learning because she had no wish to take a life, not after her adoptive parents had been so brutally murdered. Now, though, she knew that, if she wished to protect Hajime, as well as herself and stay at his side, she would have to fight, to kill. Her basic self-defense would not be good enough now.

Hajime was silent for a long pause. Then, he spoke again.

"Alright—when we reach a safe place, I will train you."

Amber smiled slightly, hugging Hajime tightly.

"Thank you, Hajime—this means so much to me."

The samurai kissed the top of her head. Then, reluctantly, stepped back slightly in order to look her in the eyes seriously.

"Know that I will push you to your limit. I will make you one of the best—" his eyes softened, and his voice lowered, "But I will only do it because I love you—and I can't lose you."

Amber felt the color rush to her face. He had only said 'I love you' a few times and each time was beautiful and wonderful, even if the intensity of his gaze as he said it made her blush. She reached up to touch his cheek, smiling through her blush.

"I love you too, Hajime."

Hajime leaned into her touch, his lips curving in that small smile that she had come to love. His blue eyes, normally as cool and reflective as a still pond, shown with emotion as he looked at her. Amber knew, without any words, that he loved her. Hajime was the type of man who preferred to communicate with action. She knew through the looks he sent her and the way he would hold her hand, that he loved her.

Amber rose up slightly on tiptoe so that her lips touched his in a short, gentle kiss. At first, he was surprised, but he recovered quickly and returned the kiss, soft lips pressing more firmly against hers. When the short kiss had ended, she looked up at him, feeling him take her hand in his and interlace their fingers.

"I love you—and I will protect you," he murmured, "What happened tonight will never happen again."

She nodded, reading the seriousness in his eyes. He would protect her, as long as he drew breath.

"I know."

20. Safe House

I'm sorry about the wait, guys! I got the job and the job is kicking my butt. I just recently got time to write again. I know this chapter might seem kinda fluffy and filler-y, but I think you all will enjoy it! Also, Sano and Emily's lemon is being written and will take place between this chapter and the next.

I would also like to place a special shout out to Ryuketsu no hana. She has been doing some wonderful artwork of the girls and it's absolutely beautiful! Follow her on Facebook at TwinnGlass.

Hope you enjoy this chapter! As usual, R&R!

* * *

><p>Jade flipped the switch for her turn signal, following Tess, who was driving the car ahead of her. They had been driving for three days, heading across the country to what Tess had named as 'a safe house Nemu was keeping around for a last resort'. As their home had been attacked, it had been agreed that they had reached the point where it would be proper to move locations. After deciding that it was possible that Kondou and Hijikata's house could also be compromised, the group had changed the original plan. They had left both houses in town the same night as the attack, meeting up at the city limits before heading to a hotel a few hours away. There, they rested before beginning their journey in earnest. Their caravan was a long one. Tess drove in the front, leading the way, with Shinipachi accompanying her, in case she attempted anything suspicious. Despite her best attempts, she was not yet trusted by the group. Even Emily was a little wary. Jade was directly behind Tess. Her car was carrying much of the luggage, leaving room only for one passenger: Souji. He had not-so-inconspicuously orchestrated this by ensuring that their car was tightly packed, and, at one point, threatening Heisuke, who asked to ride with them, his hand 'casually' on his

sword. Behind Jade was Amber and Hajime's vehicle, also packed full of luggage. The quieter couple had been a bit more compliant than Souji, taking the luggage because it was needed, not because they wanted to be alone. Amber was followed by Emily, who carried Sano and Heisuke in her vehicle. Bringing up the rear was Kondou, with Hijikata, Chizuru, and Sannan.<p>

The caravan had passed into a very open, flat area the day before, following an infrequently traveled road. Jade hadn't seen a house in miles and Emily had already texted both her and Amber, complaining that the whole scenario felt like something out of a bad spy movie. Jade and Amber hardly minded, and they doubted that Emily truly did either. The isolation of driving provided a break from the highly stressful goings on of the past two weeks and granted some time alone with their samurai.

As Jade made the turn, Souji flipped through her numerous CDs. Over their three days in the car together, he had quickly discovered that he disliked the few rap and country songs Jade had, his taste leaned more toward the j-pop she had collected over time. She did not know whether this was because he liked the lyrics themselves or the style, but, he was working his way through every j-pop CD she owned, sometimes repeating songs he liked, and, on rarer occasions, singing along. He had once convinced her to sing to one she had made the mistake of humming along with. His rapt stare when she complied had sent her into such a blushing, flustered mess that she had refused to sing any more, despite his attempts to get her to do so. They had just started needing to repeat CD's as, while Jade's collection was extensive, it was not indefinite. In all honesty, Jade was simply glad that he had taken interest in music rather than attempting to get her to teach him how to drive.

After a moment, Souji found one he liked and switched it with the CD already in the player. He had, much to Jade's amusement, become very proficient at the task. The first song began playing and he shot her a smile, which she caught out of the corner of her eye and returned. The time alone with her, some of it spent talking, much of it simply spent listening to music, had made him very content, despite the reason for their flight. He seemed not to care about the threat of the syndicate looming over them, at least not for the moment. For the time being, Souji was perfectly content to ride along, one of her hands joined with his, enjoying her company.

As the softer strains of this particular song played, the samurai took his love's hand once again, face going a bit more serious. Jade glanced at him in the mirror to find him looking out the window in a contemplative manner. Jade looked at him curiously before returning her eyes to the road. If he wished to share his thoughts, he would. She knew that pressing him for information would not warrant results, simply due to his stubborn nature. The nature which also appeared when he wanted his way and often turned him into a bully.

She did not have to wait long. Souji abruptly pushed the button to turn off the music, causing Jade to guess that whatever he would say next would be serious indeed. He looked at her, green eyes locked on her face. Jade waited for him to say something, but he did not. The silence dragged on and Jade felt her face slowly turning red under his intense look. Finally, just as she was about to ask him if something was wrong, he spoke.

"I want to get married."

Jade's reflexes moved before her mind did. She nearly wrecked the car in reaction to the suddenness of his statement, swerving dangerously in her surprise. Despite the gravity of what he had just said, Souji smirked lightly at her reaction. After righting her car, she gave him a look of shock, turning away from the road just long enough to do so.

"You want to get married?" she repeated a little breathily.

Souji nodded, looking a bit amused now. Jade looked back at the road, feeling a blush crawl up her neck and onto her face. In Japan, marriage was very serious. Usually, the couple spent a long time in friendship and then courtship before getting married. She supposed, though, that, for him at least, they had been courting for quite a while. Even with her memories of her time with him as Jun, her life as Jade caused a gap of separation for her, making this all seem a bit sudden. To Souji, though, it was just a short while ago that they had parted, and not at all odd for him to mention this. Still, for him to say it so casually—She cleared her throat.

"What brought this on so suddenly?" she asked, a bit tremulously.

Souji's amusement faded, his expression turning serious once more.

"I've been thinking during this drive," he mused, observing the way their fingers were intertwined, his eyes calculating, "I saw Hajime's face when that rasetsu had Amber—I've never seen him look like that—afraid," his eyes flicked away from their joined hands, moving to her face, "I felt that when you were fighting with me."

Jade remained silent, knowing that, when Souji was being serious and speaking freely like this, it was best to let him simply do so. However, that knowledge did not stop her mind from reeling in surprise confusion at his sudden confession, even as he explained it.

"I thought I might lose you again. And I swore to myself that I wouldn't let that happen," he paused, finding the right words, "I told you back then that, if I hadn't been a captain of the Shinsengumi, and had I not been dying of that illness, I would marry you," his smirk returned, though it was more charming than amused, "Now, I'm not a captain and I'm not sick—so nothing's holding me back," his eyes softened, "I'm also not letting you leave my side, whether or not you're in danger. So, we might as well make it official."

Jade's eyes were wide and her face bright red. She stared at Tessa's car in front of them. She did not know how to respond. Part of her was still trying to come to terms with the fact that he had proposed. Another part was overtaken by how sweetly he had worded his explanation. It was so simple in his mind. Souji usually was one to see things in black and white, especially when it came to his loved ones. That was why he could kill so easily for them. To him, the process was simple. He loved her, he had courted her, he wanted her, he would marry her. Still, in this day and age—

Jade realized that he was waiting for her to respond. Her blush darkened exponentially.

"Iâ€¦" she paused, not sure what to say. Then, after a moment, she sighed, "I love you," she said in a breathy, almost exasperated way, those words being all she could think to say.

Souji immediately smiled his catlike smile in response, knowing that she was saying yes.

"Arigato. I love you too, Jade"

He pressed his lips to her hand before looking at her as seriously as he could with his eyes shining so brightly, as brightly as she had ever seen them.

"As soon as we get the chance," he promised.

Jade nodded. She felt as though she were in a dream and might wake up at any moment. Souji had proposed to her. And she had said yes.

* * *

><p>The caravan arrived at their destination late that evening. By means of cellphone communication and careful guidance, Tessa led them off the flatlands and into a cliff-riddled, almost mountainous region. Red rock rose against the sky, desert and flatland spreading out beyond it. It was beautiful, however, after driving off-road through some rather treacherous paths that made even Hijikata feel a bit of trepidation, the landscape seemed less beautiful and much more deadly. Finally, after winding uphill and downhill and through valleys, the caravan finally came to a path that jutted out from the side of a cliff. Taking it around the rock wall, they came into view of a large house. As they drew nearer, it became apparent that the house was built into the cliff face itself, carved into the rock and jutting out in some places to follow the curve of the mountain. A large waterfall thundered from underneath the structure, falling down into the valley below. From the air, it would be nearly invisible and, if one did not know how to get to it, nearly impossible to find over ground. Tessa had been correct, it was indeed a safe house.<p>

Carved into the cliff face beside the house was a cave, the outcropped path leading directly into it. The cave proved to be an improvised parking garage. It effectively hid the cars from outside view while simultaneously providing enough room for everyone to park. Emily and Kondou's were the most difficult to maneuver as they both drove larger vehicles, but, after some difficulty, all five cars had been successfully hidden inside the cave.

As the passengers exited the vehicles, they gathered in the open area of the cave turned parking garage, next to a metal door, much like those used in industrial buildings. For the time being, their luggage was left behind in the cars. Everyone was interested in seeing what this odd safe house was like before settling in. Tessa moved to stand before them all. Over their days of travel, the tensions between the group and the newcomer had lessened only slightly. While Shinipachi's time spent with her made him more comfortable joking and talking with her, even he did not lend her his trust. She had remained very much isolated.

"There are three floors to this place. I've only ever been inside once, but, I believe there are just enough bed rooms for all of us. This house was built for a long term stay and has all the necessary facilities, so no worries there," she pulled out her key ring and turned to the door, unlocking it, "I'm not giving anyone a guided tour, so feel free to wander."

With that, she stepped inside.

* * *

><p>The house, it was discovered, had more than enough room for the entire group. The first floor alone consisted of four bedrooms, a library, a sitting room, a bathroom, a dining room, a kitchen, a pantry, a utility room, and a large storage closet. Just inside the main door that led from the garage was a foyer. Off to the right in the foyer were the stairs to the second floor. The second floor was dominated by bed rooms, though it did contain a bathroom and a sitting room. The basement lay at the foot of a second flight of stairs leading downwards. It too contained a bedroom, bathroom, sitting room and laundry room, creating an apartment of sorts. Past those, however, the construction became more industrial. As the house was built over the waterfall, there was an alternating series of glass windows viewing the water and walkways to cross to the other side. On the other side was the breaker room and a large storage room.<p>

After the exploration of the house was completed, the party met in the first floor sitting room. It was decided that Sanan, Kondou, Hijikata, and Chizuru would take the first floor and the others the second, as the individual groups had grown used to living together. The basement would remain unoccupied. Tessa attempted to take the apartment downstairs, however, as she was yet untrusted, it was decided that she would take a corner room upstairs, hemmed in by Heisuke and Shinipachi's rooms. The couples of the group quickly claimed rooms next to each other as well, unwilling to be separated. Once rooming was assigned, luggage was brought in and the process of settling began.

Sano insisted on helping Emily drag her luggage from the vehicle and to her room, refusing to allow her to make more than one trip for her bags. He also refused to let her help him, shooting her a wink and telling her that she could assist him in unpacking if she finished quickly enough. Muttering to herself about just how infuriating her man was, she went about doing as he said. Fortunately, the rooms had already been equipped with furniture. Bedding was found in the storage room on the first floor. Though it was simple, single colored material rather than her gold comfort set, Emily rather liked it. Nemu had an affinity for soft objects, the result being that the bedding she had purchased was very soft. It would do nicely.

Unpacking did not take long, as they had gathered only what they needed and whatever else fit in their hastily packed bags. In a very short time, Emily had put away her clothes. Set out a few photos, laid her electronics on top of the dresser, and made the bed. She sighed, taking the time to arrange her drawers. Despite how nice this new house was, it lacked the warm, homey feel of their original house. Though, she thought wryly, it wasn't very homey when covered

in blood. Vaguely, she wondered what the police would make of the house when they were called in.

As she unpacked her last items, she paused. In her hands were her rifle and handgun. She stared at them a moment before putting them in the closet along with her extra ammunition. She could still picture the sprays of blood as her bullets struck their marks, killing the men who dared to attack her home and family. She shuddered. Though it had been necessary, she took no pleasure in having killed, even if they were enemies. There was something terrible about having the power to end a life. Like a child blowing out a candle, she had snuffed at least two men from existence.

Emily closed her eyes as her trail of thought continued. If she had not killed them, it would have been her and her friends who were snuffed out. She refused to let that happen. With Nemu gone and the Syndicate pursuing them, Emily would fight tooth and nail to ensure her own survival and that of those around her. If that meant killing, so be it.

She sat down on the bed, allowing herself to be wrapped up in her own thoughts. Still, she did not want to just survive, either. She wanted to live. To do that, Kaito and his Syndicate would have to fall. She sighed once more, trailing her fingers over the soft bedspread.

Noises of movement from next door alerted her that Sano was making himself at home. She allowed herself to smile softly, thinking of him. He was so strong and steady in this time of crisis. Without him, she was sure she would have gone to pieces. He helped her keep it together, and, even though he was good at hiding it, she suspected she did the same for him. She loved him with all that she could and more. The thought of losing him, she had seen the look in Hajime's eyes when Amber had been so near to death. She pressed her lips together in a thin line, smile falling quickly. She could not imagine feeling that.

She was quiet for a long moment. Then, she stood. Slowly, she left her room and turned to go to his. Upon reaching the door, she knocked softly.

"Come in," Sano's voice called, slightly muffled by the door.

Emily pushed the door open and stepped inside, allowing it to fall shut behind her. Sano looked up, smiling slightly.

"Finished already?"

Emily shrugged one shoulder.

"I didn't have much."

He nodded, going about his own unpacking. Emily watched him as a companionable silence fell over them. She observed him as she had many times before, taking in his golden eyes and reddish hair. The strong yet graceful movements he made, the product of years of fighting. The softness around his eyes from where he was more apt to smile than frown or scowl. Yes, she loved him. She loved his loyalty and how he gave all for whatever cause he chose to follow. She loved how he never backed down from a challenge or a fight. She loved his

tendency to tease and joke. She loved how, despite his strength, he was so gentle.

Sano finished unpacking, tucking his now empty bags into the closet. Then, he turned to face her, smiling his gentle smile and cocking his head slightly.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Emily blushed lightly as she realized that she had been staring at him for some time with a somewhat dreamy expression. She glanced away.

"â€|Just thinking about how much I love you."

Sano chuckled, crossing to her. He gently placed one calloused hand to her cheek, turning her face towards him again.

"Don't be embarrassed," he murmured, still smiling, "I think about how much I love you most of the time."

Emily's lips curved upward as she looked up at him.

"We're so sappyâ€|we might put Amber and Hajime to shame."

Sano grinned.

"We definitely will. Hajime doesn't stand a chance against me when it comes to women."

Now it was Emily's turn to chuckle. He had said that in such a confident tone that she could not help it. However, even with their playful banter, her chuckle was a bit sad, her thoughts still tainted with sadness.

Sensing this, Sano pulled her close so that she was engulfed in a warm embrace. He was silent for a moment, holding her. Then, he finally spoke.

"â€|what's wrong?" he asked quietly.

Emily turned her face into his chest, muffling her words.

"Iâ€|I'm terrified of losing you again."

Long ago, when Emiko had lived in Edo, Sano had left the Shinsengumi with Shinipachi. Upon his departure, he had gone to her and promised that he would return after completing what he needed to do. However, it had not been long afterward that she had received word of his death. Directly after that, Nemu had cast her fateful spell. Emiko had been devastated. They had dreamed together of settling down in the country, raising a family, living a peaceful life. That dream was shattered by his demise.

Sano's arms tightened around her.

"You won't," he said, his voice steady, "Thanks to Kazama's curse, I won't leave you againâ€|this time, I can promise that for sure."

Emily hugged him tightly, as though clinging to him would cement his words. Kazama's curse had been a double bladed sword, it seemed. While he had cast it on them with malicious intent, the Shinsengumi was making the best of it.

"I'll hold you to it."

They stood there for a moment, Emily pressed against his chest, listening to his heart, Sano holding her tightly. She breathed him in, feeling the hardness of his body around hers. Her doubts and worries slowly fell back to dormancy. They were replaced by stronger feelings much like those from earlier.

It was while they stood like this that a desire made itself known in Emily's mind. She had always desired Sano. How could she not? He was a gorgeous man and she loved him deeply. However, she had wanted to wait. Now, though, with the Syndicate actively chasing them and tomorrow's events lying in mystery, she was not so sure. She did not know how much more time she had with him. While it might be difficult for her to die, and that was just a theory, she still was very much mortal. Her life could be snuffed out like a candle too. Her hands tightened, fisting in the back of his shirt.

Sano moved to look down at her, to inquire after what worry she had dredged up. However, she spoke first, looking up at him quickly.

"I want you to make love to me," she blurted out.

Sano stilled, eyes widening. He stared at her, almost unblinkingly, his mouth slightly open in surprise. There was a silence between them, during which he searched her face and eyes, searching for the reason for her sudden outburst. He must have found something there, because his gaze softened.

"Are you're sure, Emily?"

Emily nodded before her nerves could catch up.

"I'm sure."

He paused again, watching her. Then, slowly, deliberately, he nodded.

21. Training

****Hey, all! Sorry about the long wait! Between college starting again and working on my Magi fanfic project, I haven't had much time for _Whisps_. But, I'm set on taking a bit of time to advance the story! I've been rewatching the anime with my mom and my dad joined us, XD. Hajime walked on screen and I was just like 'yus, my beautiful samurai, I have missed you'. Creeped my dad out a bit, haha!****

****A few notes for this chapter. First, it's a bit fluffy and, I do apologize if it's a little rough. I'm getting back into the swing of writing the guys and was like 'oh gosh, oh gosh, I hope this is right'. Second, though "Hajime" is the name of everyone's favorite left-handed samurai, it is also the Japanese word for "Begin", which is called out at the beginning of a duel or sparring match. Third...Toshi is here. I got a review saying that we needed more**

Toshi, Sannan, Koundou, and Chizuru. And so...Toshi...in all of his glorious sexy badassery. I was trying not to drool. Good lord, that man is attractive. Anywho! There will definitely be more of those four in here from now on! Though, you'll have to bear with me when Sannan shows up in earnest. When I was introduced to the series and asked my friends "Who's the glasses guy?" they replied "That's Creeper-san...I mean, Sannan-san" so, I've had a bit of a bias against him since before I even really got into the series ^^'.

**

**Also! For those of you who don't know, Sano and Emily's lemon has been up for a while under the title "Tourmaline Yellow". If you haven't checked it out already, do so! That's the reason Emily isn't in this chapter...she's doing...things...with Sano...sexy things. Hehe. I don't know who will be next in the order of doing the sexy things. I have both Souji/Jade and Hajime/Amber's lemons planned out, but, I don't know which order to do them in. So! It's up for a vote! Who would you like to read about first?*

That's all I've got for now! Please, read, enjoy, and review!

* * *

><p>Amber exited the bathroom, having finished unpacking a few minutes before. Since there was only one bathroom on the second floor, there would be quite a bit of sharing going on. Not that she minded too much. She was used to sharing with Emily and Amber, and the men did not spend too much time individually primping. Unsurprisingly, Hajime was the quickest, and the cleanest. If not for the steam left after he showered, it would be difficult to ever tell he had been there. Souji was much the same, though, he did have an annoying habit of leaving his towel draped over the sink, according to Sano. Amber personally thought he did it on purpose. Sano was more conscious about making sure things at least looked orderly, even if they weren't put away perfectly. Heisuke and Shinpachi simply didn't seem to care. They kept things relatively clean due to their former culture, however, they had a tendency to leave the toothpaste and such laying out. At least, that's what Emily complained of when she'd gone down into the basement to play games with them at the other house.<p>

Amber unpacked her toiletries, slipping them into the drawer that had been set aside for the girls' belongings. When she was satisfied that she had only taken up her part of the drawer through careful stacking, she made her way back to her own room. She tucked her empty bags under the bed and glanced around. Everything was unpacked and put away in an acceptable manner. She was already lamenting the loss of her books. She had managed to grab a few of her favorites, but the space in her bag had been needed for other items, and the extra weight would have been impractical. Still, she could not help but look at the five novels stacked on top of her dresser. She sighed, she still had the numerous downloads on her tablet, but, it wasn't the same as holding a material object in her hands.

A knock on the door pulled her from her depression. She turned quickly, unable to keep from smiling just a bit. She and Hajime had quickly laid claim to the only adjoining rooms. Why they were adjoined, they were not sure. Perhaps one of the rooms had been an office at some point. Honestly, neither cared for the reason. The couple was still recovering from that terrible moment in which

Amber's death had been almost certain. Even after a few days in the car together, they were unwilling to be separated. Short of staying in the same room, this was the next best thing.

She quickly crossed the room to answer Hajime's knock at the adjoining door. As soon as she opened it, his arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a warm embrace. Amber was surprised by the suddenness, but, she quickly relaxed against him, smiling softly. She tucked her head under his chin, returning his embrace. She inhaled his scent, a clean smell, like soap and lotus.

She, Emily, and Jade had once had a rather odd conversation about each of the men's individual scents. Amber closed her eyes as she remembered it, the three of them sitting in Emily's room, taking a few minutes of quiet as the men trained in the fenced-in backyard of their former home.

_Emily hugged a gold pillow to her chest, resting her chin atop it, her expression pensive. She sat on her bed, leaning against the wall. Her blonde hair was loose, tumbling down past her shoulders in a fall of yellow gold. She flipped her side swept bangs from her eyes with an impatient toss of her head. Amber sat on the floor, near the door, playing a game of solitaire, her gaze sweeping over the cards as her nimble fingers shifted them about. Her dark hair was bound up messily to keep it back from her face and she wore only a tanktop and sweatpants. _

Jade stood at the window, peeking through into the backyard. Her brown eyes wide and her lips slightly parted, she watched the men practice. Being on the second floor gave her a perfect view down into the fenced in yard. She leaned against the sill, nose almost touching the glass. Emily glanced at her.

_ "__What's going on, Jade?" she asked, in an almost bored tone.

_

_Jade didn't look away from the window. _

_ "__Hajime and Souji are sparring." _

_Amber paused in her game, hand hovering over the cards. Then, rather quickly, she stood and quickly crossed the room to join Jade at the window. The older girl moved over to share the space with her as they watched the fight. Emily made an amused sound. _

_ "__Sano has taken his shirt off," Amber observed with an air of vague interest. _

_Emily shot off the bed, pillow falling to the floor, forgotten. She flew to the window, jostling between her friends in order to see, her face displaying obvious excitement and anticipation. She got there just in time to watch her boyfriend finish pulling his shirt back on. She groaned, thunking her head against the window loudly enough that Heisuke, who was standing off to the side, looked up, startled. Upon seeing them at the window, he grinned and waved. Emily turned and slid down the wall. _

_ "__Why does that man continue to thwart me?" she groaned. _

_Jade did not take her eyes off the fight in the middle of the yard.

Both Hajime and Souji moved so quickly that she could barely keep up, but she enjoyed watching all the same. They were masterful in their movements and strikes. It was obvious that Hajime was giving Souji all he could ask for, but, Souji's smirk never slipped. The clack of wooden practice swords was audible even from within the room as the men's blades met again and again. Hajime's expression was distant and cold, as it always was in combat. His unique, left handed style allowed him to make attacks that none of his fellows could. But, Souji knew his techniques, as they trained often together, and met him at every strike, blocking him. Of course, the same was true in reverse. Just when it seemed one was gaining the upper hand, the other would force him back with a flurry of furious blows. Sweat caused their clothes and hair to stick to their skin, droplets flying as they danced around each other. _

_Suddenly, their swords clashed and locked. The samurai strained against each other, muscles bulging under their t-shirts. Souji's smirk fell away as he was forced to match Hajime in brute strength. If either was to disengage and attempt to take advantage of his opponent's off-balanced state, he would risk taking a hard blow should he not move in time. _

_Shinpachi, seeing the girls in the window, grinned and called something out. Hajime's eyes darted, almost involuntarily, to the window. _

_It was all Souji needed. _

_The green eyed man was like lightning, slipping under Hajime's blade. Hajime's eyes widened and he moved to block, but he was too late. He winced ever so slightly as Souji struck him in the side none too lightly. _

_Jade couldn't help but smile at his victory. She watched as he stepped back, smirking. Hajime sighed, stepping back as well. The two bowed to each other. Then, as they stood upright again, Souji turned slightly to look up at the window. Upon seeing Jade, his smile widened and he raised a hand. Jade waved back, her expression one of a smitten girl. He grinned, touching two fingers to his lips. Jade blew him a kiss at the wordless request. Heisuke wrinkled his nose at the display and called out to Souji. The older man glanced at him in annoyance before sighing and giving Jade one last wave. Then, he turned away to continue training. _

_ "I think Sano smells nice," Emily suddenly said. _

_Her friends both turned to look down at her, startled out of watching their respective loves. She was still seated between them, back against the wall. Her expression was almost comically serious. She tilted her head back to look at them, blinking once. _

_ "He smells manly." _

_Amber and Jade stared at her for a moment. Then, they exchanged a glance. _

_ "Souji smells nice too," Jade admitted, taking up the topic of conversation. _

_Amber cocked her head slightly, wondering where this came from and

why they were discussing it. Her companions both looked at her curiously, waiting for her to join in with her own opinion. She stared back for a moment, then, she sighed and turned her gaze to the window once more. _

_ "Hajime smells like soap and lotus." _

_ "Lotus?" Emily asked, wrinkling her nose, "What's lotus smell like?" _

_ Amber blushed lightly, eyes on Hajime. _

_ "It's intoxicating," she muttered. _

_ Jade giggled lightly, seeing her friend's pink cheeks. _

_ "It's alright, I think Souji's pretty intoxicating myself." _

_ Amber glanced at her, smiling slightly. _

_ "Really?" _

_ Jade nodded leaning against the windowsill to watch as Souji practically walked circles around Heisuke in swordplay. _

_ "He's spicy. But a nice spicy, almost like cinnamon." _

_ Amber gave an understanding nod. From her place on the floor, Emily giggled suddenly. _

_ "Sano's just manly," she looked up at them, "You guys are hilarious, though. Figuring out exactly what they smell like." _

_ She winced as Amber kicked her, none too gently. _

_ "You're the one who started this conversation. You have no excuse to laugh at us." _

_ Emily grumbled, shooting her a look. _

_ "You're hanging out with Hajime too much!" _

Amber's thoughts were thrown off track as Hajime pulled back slightly to look down at her, his eyes soft. Amber blinked quickly as she was pulled from her reminiscing. She looked up at him, her arms still wrapped around him. They merely looked at each other for a long moment, communicating without words how much it meant for the other to be there. Hajime pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Are you finished unpacking?" he murmured, his breath warm on her skin as he pulled back only far enough to speak.

Amber closed her eyes at his nearness.

"I am."

He gave a nod.

"Then we have training."

Amber's eyes snapped open. She had almost forgotten. Hajime had spent quite a bit of their car ride planning out a personalized training regimen for her. He would teach her how to use a _kodachi_. Amber honestly had no idea where the men had picked up swords for them, but, she suspected it was quite possible that Nemu had prepared for this eventuality and stored some away. Nemu herself had professed to have training with the _kodachi_, though Amber suspected now that it was a bit more than the small amount Nemu had played it off as. Hajime also planned to expound on her hand to hand skills, just for the sake of self-defense should she find herself without a sword.

She nodded.

"The basement space?"

There was a very large space in the basement that had obviously been left open for storage. However, being warriors, the men had immediately picked it out as a good training spot.

Hajime gave a single nod in response. He stepped back from her embrace, taking her hand instead.

"I know we've been driving for a long time, and you're probably tired, but, I would like to get started so that I can gauge your current abilities."

Amber was not truly tired. After driving for a number of days, she was feeling the need to move about.

"I'm fine. Let's get started as soon as possible."

Hajime's lips twitched. He seemed pleased by her eagerness to get started. She wasn't at all like Jade, whom Souji still literally had to drag to practice.

"Get changed. I'll get your sword."

Amber smiled and stood on tiptoe to press a soft kiss to his lips. He returned the short kiss before returning to his own room. Amber closed the door and began to change into more comfortable clothes.

* * *

><p>Jade sighed, kicking her empty bags under the bed. She was finally done. She gave a long stretch accompanied by a yawn. Now, she could just curl up on her bed and take a long nap after so much driving. Maybe Souji would join her. Despite his verbal denial to others, Souji was a cuddler. He especially liked to lay with his head over her chest and listen to the rhythmic sounds of her breathing and heartbeat. It seemed to calm him. And he made the oddest humming sound when she would run her fingers through his hair, almost like a cat purring. Other times, he would pull her into an embrace and tuck her head under his chin. Either way, Jade didn't mind. As long as Souji was holding her, she was happy. She smiled absently at the thought.<p>

She was about to climb onto her bed and wait for Souji to come check on her, as he inevitably would, when she heard voices from his room.

She frowned and went over to the adjoining wall to listen. Though she couldn't make out any distinct words, she quite easily picked out Souji's voice and then someone else responding. Hijikata, maybe? She had only just begun to get to know the man and couldn't be sure. Suddenly, Souji let out a laugh. She heard Hijikata say something rather sharply. Then, silence fell.

A few moments later, there was a rap at her door.

"Jade-chan?" Souji called in a honeyed voice.

Jade froze. She knew that tone. That was the tone he used when he was going to have his way, whether she liked it or not. That was the tone he always used before dragging her off to training. He didn't want to cuddle, apparently.

Oh no!

"Come out, Jade-chan," his use of the 'chan' was further warning, "It's time to practice."

Jade twitched. She had just gotten settled. She might love Souji with everything she was, but, she was not in the mood to let him give her fresh bruises in sparring. She knew he went easy on her, but, she also knew he had no qualms about giving her more than just a tap when she left herself open.

She shot to the door and turned the little button on the knob, clicking the lock shut before he could open the door. There was silence on the other side of the door. Then, Souji chuckled in obvious amusement at her response.

"I told you, Hijikata-san."

There was a long pause. Then, something slammed into the door, shaking it on its hinges. Jade squeaked, jumping in surprise.

"Get your ass out here," Hijikata threatened through the wooden barrier.

There was no room for argument, especially not with the underlying threat of 'or the door's coming down'. For some reason, she didn't think Hijikata would have any qualms about making good on that threat.

"Yes, sir," she said quickly, opening the door.

The vice-commander of the Shinsengumi stood before her, giving her a hard look. He held her kodachi in one hand, his katana in the other.

"I'm assessing you," he pushed her sword into her hands, "I want to see just how Souji's been training you."

Jade took the sword, frowning lightly.

"Assessing?"

She glanced at where Souji stood a bit behind Hijikata. He shot her a wink and a catlike smile.

"Sparring. Testing your skills. Seeing how well you can hold your own," Hijikata explained, "With the syndicate coming after you actively, we need to step up your training."

Jade almost groaned. She didn't think she could take any more straight days of training. Apparently, Hijikata caught the look in her eyes. His own narrowed.

"Do you want to die?" he asked darkly.

Jade clutched her kodachi.

"No," she replied quietly.

"Then you're going to train your ass off until you get to where you won't."

Jade was tempted to retreat back into her room just to see if he really would knock the door down and drag her to training. However, there was suddenly a very loud and very questionable noise from Sano's room, which was just across the hall from Souji's. Jade stared at the door, realizing that what she just heard was a moan and it had very obviously been Emily's. Souji looked highly amused as he glanced at the door and then noticed Jade's face, which was turning slowly red. Hijikata 'tched' in annoyance and shook his head, muttering something in Japanese.

Jade quickly exited her room and walked down the hall, not quite able to come to terms with what her ears were telling her was going on. Suddenly, training didn't seem so bad. Much better than hearing the results of whatever Emily and Sano were doing. Souji laughed openly at her embarrassment and quickly caught up with her.

"Don't worry. We'll definitely be louder," he murmured to her.

Jade went crimson and smacked his arm.

"Stop it!" she hissed, flustered.

He laughed again, catching her hand and entwining his fingers with hers.

Hijikata followed along behind them as they went down first one flight of steps and then another to reach the basement. From there, they walked through the basement apartment and then across the glassed-in waterfall. To Jade's surprise, the makeshift dojo was already occupied. Their small group paused to watch the other occupants.

Hajime had started off with Amber's hand to hand skills, wanting to understand her base knowledge before training her further. As they watched, Amber threw a punch, which her partner easily batted aside with his open palm. She was obviously out of practice, as her movements were sloppy and easily read. Within a few moments, Hajime had her immobilized on the ground face-down, wrists behind her back. Amber huffed lightly when she realized they had an audience, slightly embarrassed by her quick defeat. Hajime paid them no mind.

"It's a good start. We definitely have something to work with," he

paused, "Your father taught you well."

She turned her head to look up at him, eyes a bit wide in surprise. Then, they softened. He knew how much that compliment meant to her. It had taken him a while to get her to open up about her adoptive parents' fate, but, during their long drive, she finally had. He understood her dislike of blood and the reason she wanted so badly to learn to fight despite that. She refused to lose him, or anyone else in her surrogate family, like she'd lost her parents.

"Thank you!"

He moved to let her up, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. He glanced at the other group and then gave a small bow when he saw Hijikata.

"Come. We'll give them room."

Amber nodded, following her samurai as he led her to the far end of the 'dojo'.

Hijikata gave a small nod of approval.

"He'll train her well," his eyes shifted to Jade, "It's your turn."

Jade felt her hands tremble a bit as she tied the sheath of the kodachi to her belt loop. This was different than sparring Souji. While Souji wasn't afraid to bruise her, she trusted him completely. She hardly knew Hijikata. While she sensed Souji respected him, she wasn't sure she wanted to spar the man. He had battled a full-blooded oni on more than one occasion, and wounded him numerous times. That spoke of great skill and power. He stepped into the center of the open space they had taken for the match, carrying himself with a confidence that made Jade want to crawl into a corner. She would admit, Hijikata scared her. Still, she reasoned that a sweet girl like Chizuru wouldn't be in a relationship with a man who would purposefully harm another in practice. And Souji wouldn't let her spar with him if he was even the slightest bit worried, even if it was his commanding officer.

Slowly, Jade stepped into the space as well, standing across from Hijikata with only a short distance between them. They both drew their swords. While she and Souji usually sparred with the wooden practice swords Nemu had gotten for the samurai through contacts unknown, it seemed that she would be using her real sword in this match. She supposed it was so that she could get used to its weight in combat. She eyed Hijikata as he drew his katana and flipped it so that the back faced her. It was longer than her kodachi, and he already had a natural reach advantage, being taller. She would have to get inside his guard, which she already believed would be next to impossible. She had heard the things the men said about Hijikata. They said he was practically an oni, and it was speculated that, during his final battle with Kazama, he had become something like a real oni. Feeling her expression tighten, Jade flipped her own blade and slipped back into the basic stance Souji had drilled into her. She could feel both men watching her every move, analyzing her for any errors. She felt very pressured already.

"Relax," Hijikata ordered, noticing her tense stance, "Tensing up

dulls your reflexes," his lips quirked in an expression somewhere between reassurance and amusement, "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

Jade took a deep breath. She glanced at Souji, who flashed her one of his catlike smiles, immediately putting her at ease. She settled into a more proper stance, now relaxed enough to do so. Souji moved into the proper position for refereeing. Then, he raised his arm, his green eyes flashing between them. Jade readied herself.

Souji brought his arm down to start the match, simultaneously stepping back to avoid the first strikes.

"Hajime!"

Jade shot forward as soon as he said the word. She refused to let Hijikata, who was the stronger opponent, attack first. His lips twisted up in a small smirk as he realized what she was doing. He easily met her first blow, their swords clanging with a force that jarred Jade's hands. Still, she held onto her kodachi tightly, whipping it around for a follow-up. Hijikata again met her sword, easily reading her movements. He was more experienced and much faster, allowing him to almost effortlessly meet any blow she made. She realized that he wasn't holding back as much as Souji did. Though she never landed a hit on Souji, she didn't feel nearly as toyed with as she did in this situation.

Hijikata blocked her next strike in a way that caused their swords to lock. Jade's eyes widened slightly. She knew this was a bad place for her to be. One of the first things Souji had told her was that she couldn't afford to get into a competition of strength with her opponents, especially not Oni. He had taught her how to avoid that sort of situation by shifting to the side and throwing the opponent off with their own weight. However, she could easily see that this wouldn't work here. Hijikata was too well-balanced, not falling into the risk of overbalancing. Still, even when not using full strength, his sword bore down on hers with a force that caused her to lock her arms, trembling. His eyes watched her carefully, silently asking what she would do now. She needed to get out of this situation.

She moved back quickly, keeping her kodachi raised defensively, to disengage. To her horror, though, Hijikata followed, switching to the offensive. She was hard pressed to keep up with his movements. He pressed every opening, forcing her to defend herself with more vigor than she ever had previously. Her arms burned with the effort of wielding the sword for so long. How long had it been? Five minutes? Not even? It all turned into a blur of action and reaction. She couldn't be still. Staying still meant a quick death. Always keep moving. Instinct took over the further she was pressed. Though she'd only had maybe a week of intensive sword training, it was paying off. Hours of practice without pause had already begun to drill things into her muscle memory. But it wasn't enough, she could feel herself slipping under the ferocity of the attacks. He really did fight like a demon, and she knew he was holding back. Sweat caused clothes to stick to her skin. She was overheated, her lungs burning for air. But there was no room to breathe. For her, in that moment, everything was a blur of dark hair and hard purple eyes and the silver clash of blades. She fought as hard as she could, but it was like she was a leaf attempting to keep from being blown away in a strong wind. Finally, her sword flew out of her hands and she found herself

standing up against the wall with the tip of a katana at her throat.

Jade breathed hard, sweat running down her face. Never had she been forced to fight with such intensity. Hijikata stepped back, lowering his sword, his long-sleeved black shirt hardly ruffled. He gave a nod.

"Not bad," he said as Jade slumped slightly, panting, "You've got the basics, and your instincts are coming. You don't hesitateâ€|even when it means killing."

Jade winced, his words bringing back memories of the kodachi sliding between bones and piercing the soft tissue beneath. The sickening reek of blood and death. She remembered the man going limp against her as her sword pierced his heart. The realization that she had just ended a life as easily as if she had blown out a candle. Hajime must have reported the events of that night to Kondou and Hijikata, it was the only way he could have known, and Souji must have told Hajime about her exploits in the battle.

She looked up as the hilt of the kodachi entered her vision. Hijikata had retrieved the sword and was now returning it. He looked at her with the same piercing gaze he had used during their match.

"Can you kill again?" he asked seriously, "Because that won't be the last we'll see of our enemies. We're shorthanded, and Souji won't always be able to protect you."

Off to the side, Souji raised a challenging brow, his expression asking if anyone would like to test his ability to protect Jade.

"Are you willing to take another life in defense of your own?" Hijikata continued.

Jade looked down at the proffered kodachi. Could she? Souji did so without batting an eye, but she was softer than Souji. Hijikata, she sensed, would take a life out of necessity, as would all of the men of the Shinsegumi. Hajime was quite adept at killing, just based on what had happened at their former home, but he didn't enjoy it. She forced her breathing to regulate. It was possible to kill without being a monster. When it was necessary to do so in order to defend one's ideals and dear ones. When the enemy was a syndicate run by a vile immortal who had his sights set on wiping out all she held precious.

Slowly, she reached out and gripped the kodachi, her hand no longer trembling. Her hand touched Hijikata's, but he did not release the sword. She stood up straight.

"If it means protecting what's important to me, and ending the syndicate, I will take a life, yes," she said firmly.

Hijikata gave another nod and released her sword. Then, in a move that surprised her, he reached up and patted her head. His expression softened as his hand rested there.

"Never thought we'd be training women to fight Oni," he said wryly,

"Times sure have changed," he mussed her hair lightly then, smiling slightly, "Take good care of Souji, ne? He gets into trouble."

Souji made an amused sound.

"Hijikata-san gets into plenty of trouble himself. How many times did you almost die on Chizuru?"

Hijikata threw Souji a scowl, removing his hand from Jade's head.

"_Urusai_. It seems like dying didn't change your punk attitude at all."

Souji laughed, sauntering over to put an arm around Jade.

"No," he said, unapologetically, "It didn't change yours either. Same old Hijikata-san."

Hijikata gave an amused scoff. Jade glanced between them, not sure what the make of the sudden influx of death jokes. She didn't think she would ever grow used to Souji's sense of humor, but, it was surprising to see the interaction between the two men. Still, she supposed, better to laugh about it than agonize over it. They were alive now, even if it was just so Kazama could exact revenge.

Hijikata's purple eyes flickered back to Jade. He bowed. Surprised, she did the same.

"Keep working with her," the vice-commander told Souji as he stood to leave, "She's improving quickly."

Souji's arm around her tightened as he smirked.

"Hai. She's _my_ student, ne? What did you expect?"

Shaking his head at Souji's prideful antics, the older man took his leave.

Souji leaned over and pressed his lips to Jade's temple then, apparently uncaring of her still-sweaty hair.

"Hijikata-san doesn't compliment people often. You did a good job."

She gave a tired smile.

"I'm glad. I don't feel like I did a very good job."

He chuckled.

"For a beginner, you did," he flashed her a cocky smile, "When I'm done with you, there won't be anyone who can beat you."

Jade couldn't help but smile back. It might have been odd, the way they had bonded over swordsmanship instead of the things normal couples bonded over, like movies, or coffee, or sports, but, they weren't exactly a normal couple. Jade was a Japanese girl who had been flung through time, and Souji was a cursed undead samurai

rasetsu. Most definitely not normal.

She wrapped her arms around him, careful of the _kodachi_, and pressed her head against his collarbone. He seemed a bit surprised at first, but he quickly returned the embrace. She took a moment to revel in his warmth and the solidarity in his embrace, closing her eyes. He was sarcastic and could be cruel. He was slightly sadistic and had a bit of an odd sense of humor. He often threatened to kill people and could be arrogant. However, he was undyingly loyal and he loved deeply. He was strong and protective. He could be so very kind and caring about others. Most importantly, though, for all his flaws and positive qualities, he was hers, and she loved him. It didn't matter if they were odd, for her, he was as perfect.

"_Koishiteru_, Souji," she murmured.

She didn't have to look up to know that he was smiling softly down at her, letting the layers of arrogance and sarcasm slip away.

"_Koishiteru_, Jade."

* * *

><p>Amber grunted as she was again put on her backside. It seemed that Hajime had decided to wait until the next day for sword training. For now, he was building her hand to hand skills. Though he was better with the sword, he was having an easy enough time outmaneuvering her at every turn without one. Her hips and rear were sure to be bruised, at least, she felt like they were.<p>

"Again."

She quickly stood at the command. Hajime had warned her that he wouldn't coddle her, and he had made good on that warning. Her wrists were beginning to turn blue from how tightly he'd held them when forcing her to break out of his grip. She had never realized how strong he was until that point, when his slender fingers had clamped around her wrists like vices. Even knowing the physics and technique of how to break a hold like that, she'd struggled. After refreshing her on the basics, he had moved to follow-up techniques. However, he had not simply let her execute those. Every strike she aimed for his face was deflected with lightning speed, every attempted sweep countered, and every attempt at retreat cut off. Hajime was incredibly observant, she discovered, able to take in the shift of her eyes or tensing of her muscles and guess what she would do next.

"When facing men like these," he had told her, "You will need to be able to defend yourself against an opponent who is stronger and faster than you."

Neither of them wanted to face another situation like Amber's being held hostage again. He was pushing her for that reason, even though his eyes darkened at the sight of every bruise she gained at his hand. He despised causing her any sort of pain, but, it was necessary in this situation, where she had to learn to fight against a stronger opponent who would do much more than bruise her.

He watched keenly as she again lined up before him, face serious as always. They looked at each other for a long moment. Then, his hand shot out to snatch her wrist. She quickly twisted away. He adapted just as fast, slipping behind her and grabbing her other wrist. He twisted her arm behind her, pushing up until she gave a sharp gasp. He held her just tightly enough for the lock to be effective, his other hand on her opposite shoulder to keep her from turning out of the hold. After sucking in a quick breath, she drove her foot down on his instep. He grunted, wincing slightly, only half regretting refreshing that move for her. His grip loosened just a bit and she wrenched her hand free, twisting to sweep his feet out from beneath him. He caught her again, getting a hold on one arm. She continued the sweep, too caught in her own momentum to stop in order to make up for his grip on her. They both went down, her collapsing atop him. She let out a small 'oof!' as she landed. Then, blushing lightly, she looked at him. He gave her a small smile.

"Don't do that in a real fight," he murmured.

She smiled slightly in return.

"I won't."

"It was a good sweep, though."

Her expression brightened at his praise.

"_Arigato_."

Any further conversation was interrupted by a teasing voice.

"_Yare_, _yare_, Hajime, making a move while training?"

The couple looked towards the voice to see that Shinpachi, Heisuke, and Chizuru had come down to watch Jade and Souji. Despite her earlier match with Hijikata, he had immediately set to working on her defensive techniques and was currently hammering away at every block she put up. Despite her exhaustion, she was putting up a good fight. Still, judging by the periodic yelps and small exclamations of pain, she was going to have a new set of bruises the next day. Shinpachi grinned at them from where he sat on the floor beside Heisuke. Chizuru, on Heisuke's other side, smiled at them, covering a giggle with her hand.

"You were charged with watching Winters-san," Hajime shot back in his famous deadpan, "Why aren't you upstairs doing so?"

Shinpachi waved him off.

"Kondou-san and Hijikata wanted to talk to her. Sannan's with them," he shrugged, "They can handle her."

Hajime 'hmph'ed. Amber scrambled off of him, thoroughly embarrassed at having been seen in such a compromising position. As she stood, Hajime gracefully rose to his feet as well. He moved to her side, taking her wrists gently in his hands to observe the bruises.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly.

Amber nodded.

"I've always bruised easily. I'll be fine."

His blue eyes flashed up to meet hers. Then, he gently pulled her from the room, ignoring the grin Shinpachi shot them. Heisuke was too busy scolding Souji for being too rough on Jade to notice.

"Oi, Souji!" the younger man said, frowning, "She's not gonna be able to hold a sword if you keep hitting her like that."

Souji smiled dangerously.

"Ma, Heisuke, it sounds like you're telling me I don't know how to train my _koibito._"

Heisuke pouted and grumbled, unwilling to fight with the older man. Chizuru cast a worried eye over Jade, however, the expression vanished when Jade tried to catch Souji off guard. He blocked and laughed.

"Have to be faster than that, Jade-chan," he crooned teasingly.

Amber lost sight of them as Hajime led her out the door. She followed him as he took her back through the basement apartment and back up to the first level. A few moments later, she found herself in the kitchen. From little ways off, in the sitting room a few rooms down, Amber could hear voices. She reasoned that the three leaders of the Shinsegumi must have been questioning Tessa there.

Hajime set her on a stool at the island in the center of the kitchen before moving to the set of drawers under the counter on one side of the room. She watched him curiously. He had remained silent as he led her through the house and she was curious as to what he was planning. He pulled a plastic sandwich bag and a towel from their respective drawers. Amber's lips quirked slightly as he walked to the freezer.

"Hajime," she said softly.

His blue eyes flickered to her as he opened the freezer door.

"_Nani_?"

"These will heal fine on their own."

He ignored her small protest, filling the sandwich bag with ice. Then, he sealed it and wrapped the bag in the towel. As the freezer door swung shut, he returned to her side, homemade icepack in hand. He gently took her wrists as he slid onto the stool next to her, laying them side by side on the countertop. He then laid the icepack over them. She winced slightly as the chill began to seep from the ice and into her skin.

"They'll heal faster if treated," he said quietly.

Amber looked over at him and he met her gaze steadily. Then, his fingertips grazed her cheekbone as he reached up to touch her

face.

"They're just bruises," she murmured.

Hajime shook his head, his dark hair falling to partially hide his right eye.

"They're bruises I gave you. So I will be the one to treat them."

His palm pressed against her cheek, gently caressing her face.

"I asked you to train me. I knew I would get bruised."

His lips quirked at their small argument.

"Yes. But that doesn't mean we need to leave them. Or that I enjoy giving them," he glanced at where the ice pack covered her wrists, his fingers sliding to take a lock of her hair from where it had fallen from her almost haphazard ponytail, "This is different than training the men of the Shinsengumi."

He didn't have to explain further. Amber understood. Hajime was honorable, and, while his desire to help her protect herself outweighed any old belief that women should not be trained, he disliked harming her, even in a minor way during training. Bruises were to be expected, he knew this as he had trained others. However, he had never trained his koibito. He very much saw it as his job to keep her from harm, yet it was his fingers that had darkened the skin of her wrists.

She sighed softly as he toyed with the lock of her hair.

"I know—I just don't want you to feel bad."

His smile widened just a bit and he drew the lock to his lips, eyes on her face.

"_Arigato_, Amber, for worrying about my feelings."

She smiled back, sensing the mood shift from their almost playful belligerence to something softer. She glanced at the ice pack.

"Where did you learn how to make that?" she asked curiously, changing the subject.

The Shinsengumi most certainly didn't have plastic sandwich bags back in 19th century Japan. However, Hajime had made the icepack quickly and efficiently. He glanced at the ice pack as well, giving a very soft chuckle.

"I used the internet."

Amber blinked once in surprise, feeling her eyes widen. Her samurai boyfriend, the man who could not figure out how to text, or perhaps did not see the need in texting, had used google. He seemed amused by her expression.

"How did you think I had done it?"

Amber shrugged.

"I didn't think about it until I asked you," she paused, still taken aback, "â€|you used google?"

He flashed a brief smile, leaning forward to leave a brief kiss on her lips, definitely amused now.

End
file.